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COVER: Elric of Melnibone wields his mystical blade.
Painting by Michael Whelan.

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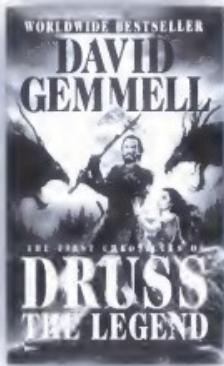
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Admit it—you have this same daydream on the way down the boarding tunnel...

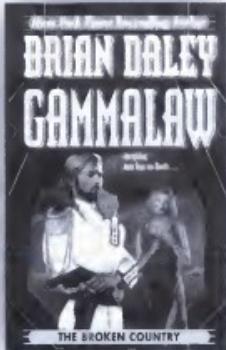
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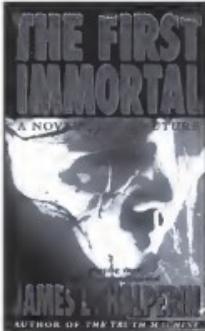
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REALMS OF FANTASY

VOLUME 5

NUMBER 2

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Editorial Director

SHAWNA MCCARTHY
Editor

STEPHEN VANN
Art Director

CHRISTINA KRÜG
Assistant Art Director

REBECCA MCCABE
Assistant Editor

BRIAN MURPHY
Editorial Assistant

PATRICIA A. ALLEN
LAURA CLEVELAND
Copy Editors

Contributors:

Tanith Lee, Charles de Lint, J.K. Potter, Noreen Doyle, Terri Windling, Gahan Wilson, Nigel Suckling, Dan Persons, Judith Berman, Richard Parks, S.N. Dyer, Mary O'Keefe Young, Carol Heyer, Annie Lunsford, Web Bryant, Paul Salmon, Ken Granning, Stephen Johnson, Tom Carty, Jane Yolen, John Berkey

DIANE BONIFANTI
Business Manager

AMANDA ZELONES
Finance Manager

KELLY KING
Circulation Consultant

CARI WYNNE
Production Assistant

ALI LORAINNE
Production Assistant

STEVE DORBOWSKI
Circulation Manager

WARNER PUBLISHER SERVICES
International Distribution

Newsstand Consultant
ARTHUR O'HARE

Advertising Offices:

JOE VARDA
Advertising Director

KATE CHAPMAN
Advertising Assistant

11305 Sunset Hills Road, Reston, VA 20190
703-471-1555 / FAX: 703-471-1559

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Editorial

Happy Un-Birthday to Us

AS THOSE OF YOU WHO ACTUALLY read these editorials may have noticed, I was pretty much entirely uninspired last issue. I rambled on about tomatoes and roses and porch swings, and gave you a few tips about how to submit stories to the magazine. Typical midsummer burnout, really. Filling up space, talking to myself.

Imagine my chagrin then when I noticed, after the issue had already been released, that there was a perfectly wonderful editorial topic standing right outside my window, jumping and shouting and waving its little arms for attention. But I didn't see it. I looked right past it, at my stupid tomatoes and pain-in-the-butt roses. The topic, when it finally succeeded in getting my attention, pointed to the blinking neon sign around its neck: IT WAS YOUR FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE, YOU MORON! Whoops....

Well, you know how they say time flies when you're having fun. Actually, it does. It flies twice as fast when you're a bimonthly magazine whose cover date has no connection to the month in which you're writing the editorial; when, in fact, you're often unclear on what the cover date might actually be for the editorial you're writing. (It strikes me that it might make for an overall improvement in my editorials in general if I gave some thought to what issue they would appear in. For instance, if I'm calculating right, this will be the November/December issue. Holiday time! I could send some happy holiday wishes your way, and maybe talk about ancient underpinnings of ritual and fantasy that underlie many of our modern celebrations. I could, but I have to use this issue to write the editorial I should have written last time. So happy holidays, etc., and I'm sure the local library will be happy to give you some good books on ancient harvest/solstice festivals and their relationship to modern life.)

As I was saying, last issue was our fifth anniversary issue. When I stop to think about it (which, obviously isn't that often...) I can hardly believe that we've been here that long. Had you suggested to anyone involved in the fiction maga-

zine business 10 years ago that a publisher would be able to make a huge, long-running success out of a full-color, full-sized, glossy fiction magazine, you would have been laughed out of the room. Magazines for many years operated on a shoestring—digest-sized, pulp paper, and no ads other than the book clubs and a few publishers' ads. There was no digest-sized rack space in most magazine stands, so they lived and died by their paid subscriptions.

No one saw any way around this marginal existence til Sovereign Media came along with SF Age and then, a bit later, *Realms of Fantasy*. I won't claim that we've single-handedly saved the SF and fantasy short fiction market, but I will claim that we've given it a shot in the arm that it had long needed. Two new markets added to a field that was losing them one by one can only help both writer and reader.

I just want to say thanks (belatedly, of course) to all of you. You've been an incredibly helpful and encouraging audience and without your feedback and continuing support, we could never have made it as far as we have. I'd also like to thank Carl Gnam, our sovereign (!) publisher, for believing in me, the writers, the artists, and the readership and allowing us to explore all the realms of fantasy.

—Shawna McCarthy



Letters.

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

Regarding "Survey, Part II," I think Mr. Ray McLaren should be more circumspect in what he writes to magazine editors. You never know where a letter will end up! In your reply to Mr. McLaren, you noted that if we wished to see more of the letters you received about the Survey we should let you know. Well, my reply to that is—let the coterie commence! I, for one, am eager to see what other people have to say on this subject. Let us have a look at the "less popular opinions" you mentioned in the June issue. Although I do hope that Mr. McLaren is not typical of the "less popular" letters; I seek a serious discussion, not the rantings of a boor!

Yours truly,
Curry A. Mosher
Wellsboro, PA

G'day, down there!

For a starter, "Walter's Christmas Musik" is likely to become one of my favorite Christmas stories. Who appended in your reply to Joe Perkins ... same issue? (Dec 1997) ... hit a bone and broke your fang? Hurts! Re: The Games column in *ROF* 3.4: Hack lives on as Nethack on large and small computers, even Mess-DOS machines! So do Rogue, Larn, Moira, Omega, and who knows how many other such games.

Finally, "My God is better than your God!" Oh, jihad? Wanna fight? You know you're onto something when you find yourself not so much reading the words on the page as in there partaking in the action.)

Reynir H. Stefansson
Reydarfjord, Iceland

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I have reveled in the pages of *ROF* for several years. It would be impossible to single out one aspect I enjoy most, but my delight with each new issue begins when I remove the outer mailer, wondering which artist's work will appear and how his or her cover illustration will move me.

I confess disappointment over the August 1998 cover with its still shot from a television show. I do not slight the need for good fantasy fiction in all media; however, when I pick up a magazine, I have chosen to read great words. I seek to steal a few hours away from the glowing box.

Watching television cannot substitute for reading great fiction because it doesn't allow me to interpret through my mind's eye. To watch television is to passively accept the vision shown; to read is to imagine what the writer has created relying only on a code of

words and symbols. That *ROF*'s stories are illustrated by some of the finest fantasy artists is a bonus. The illustration is at once compelling, but not intrusive.

On behalf of those who hunger for the well-written word and the artistic illustration, please keep bringing us the best columns, short stories, and the cover and interior art that has made *ROF* the great escape from television.

Shanon M. Sara
Seattle, WA

Thank you for your thoughtful letter. I do agree quite heartily with the points you make regarding television and the written word. However, the cover was relevant to the August Games column written by Eric T. Baker. Let's face it, Xena's photograph on the cover probably sold a few extra newsstand issues as well. This extra revenue means we can continue to provide our readers with exceptional columns, artwork, fiction, and all the rest ...

Dear Shawna;

I just finished devouring my latest issue of *Realms of Fantasy* (June 1998) and I had to write ... Don Webb's "Meeting the Messenger" was incredible! As a dark fantasy buff, as well as a practicing Wiccan, I found the piece very entertaining. Terri Windling's Folkroots column on cats was equally wonderful. The only thing that made me scratch my head was the letter on page 8 from a disgruntled reader. The individual does everything humanly possible to insult your fine magazine, then he asks for author's guidelines, only after he has claimed his "last letter was written quickly and was poorly thought out; with equally poor dictation ..." What is the world coming to?

Mark A. Vébantumiglia, Ph.D.
East Alton, IL

Dear *Realms*:

I thoroughly enjoyed Terri Windling's "A Winter's Tale." Not many magazines have the guts to print something of this magnitude. It shows that Christianity has borrowed from European Wiccanism and vice versa. In the United States people do not know, or will not admit that this is true. Thank you for going to great lengths to bring the truth to the literate public!

Sincerely,
John Irvin

To Editor McCarthy:

Effective immediately, I wish to cancel my subscription to your magazine, for its qual-

ity is far below what I had expected. This unfortunate fact stems at least in part from its tendency to publish literary material masquerading as fantasy (via token genre elements).

Thank you,
Jeffrey Jeffcoat
Russellville, AR

Okay, ignoring the fact that this reader is obviously disappointed with the literary content of our magazine—let me use Mr. Jeffcoat's letter as a springboard for explaining a few things that I am NOT responsible for as Editor here at ROF. I cannot personally refund your money for a canceled or missing subscription. I cannot change the address on your subscription ... one needs to contact the Circulation Dept. for those things. I cannot return a story to you if your postage is not included. I cannot make IRC's magically worth more than their value (thus the post office has been returning quite a few stories from abroad to the box for insufficient postage). Although I will certainly (eventually) pick up a story sent via certified mail—this does not endear me to you as an author, I will eagerly read all "Letters to the Editor" both pro and con—but sending me a nasty note and then submitting a manuscript a few weeks later—well, suffice it to say I have a good memory for names ... Nasty notes are inclusive of those blasting me for taking too long in rejecting a previous submission, for neglecting to send guidelines in a timely manner, and/or for failing to include personal commentary when I rejected an earlier piece. Finally, I am not responsible for the content of your manuscript or even for improving the content of your story ... send me an outstanding tale that deserves to be published and I will send you a contract!

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I have deeply enjoyed your magazine ever since I began reading it. I was particularly impressed with Sherwood Smith's "And Now Abideth These Three" and S.P. Somtow's "Dr. Rumpole." I was caught off guard by the delightful twist of the endings in each story. "Dr. Rumpole" was not your usual fantasy fare—but it was certainly brilliant! I wish to thank you as the Editor, and also to thank the contributing writers. You have drawn me to the world of fantasy and for that I will be forever thankful.

Kris Lancaster

*Your comments are welcome. Send them to:
Letters to the Editor, Realms of Fantasy, P.O.
Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, e-mail to: shawna896@aol.com*

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BY GAHAN WILSON

Death and Vampires stalk the small presses while Card shows us his Heartfire.

THROUGHOUT THE YEARS WE READERS OF FANTASY HAVE BEEN CONTINUOUSLY AND deeply indebted to a stalwart little band of brave (I think it might not be too far a stretch to describe some of them as heroic) souls who have boldly risked financial ruin, to say nothing of the loss of their day jobs and the very strong possibility of their families dissolving through neglect, because they have thrown themselves with awe-inspiring abandon into the task of running small presses dedicated to publishing tiny printings of books that otherwise would never have had a chance of coming into existence.

As if these brave folk do not have enough problems, there has always been an eager army of carpers and nit-pickers who—I suspect mostly because they have no or very little life of their own—eagerly vie with one another to accuse various members of this group of being mainly motivated by greed for the minuscule profits a few of them have by some miracle managed to squeeze from their efforts or by the lust for the obscure and esoteric fame which others have garnered from their tireless and exhausting efforts through the years.

Behold, I snap my fingers at these nay-sayers, I hand them a frown of contempt and a sneer of disdain and do not hesitate to announce that it is my firm opinion—based among other things on varyingly intimate contact with people who've gotten themselves involved in this sort of thing—the overriding reason by far that these courageous few take such hair-raising risks and expose themselves to the ravages of such absurd overwork is the purest one possible: They are hopelessly in love with

the literature of the marvelous and the weird and the terrible and they burn with the generous urge to share its wonders with as many fellow lovers as they can.

So there. Glad *that's off my chest*.

Fedogam & Bremer is one of the feisty outfits described above. I know almost nothing about them personally, but I have purchased, been given and very happy to keep, various books they have turned out. I've done covers for a couple of them and I believe I have even reviewed a number of them over the years, though I don't keep a file so I can't be sure.

When I heard they had come out with a posthumous collection of short stories by and a series of tributes to a dear old friend, Karl Edward Wagner, I immediately sent out a request to F & B for a copy of the book so that I could do a review of it for *Realms*. It took some little while to make contact as the staff of these small presses often consists of two or three people who do this work in their spare time after finishing those regular chores that keep their wives and children fed and housed, but eventually someone with a tired but friendly voice called at an odd hour and when it all ended with my receiving not only Karl's book but a small box of other volumes they'd produced without my knowledge, I decided it was high time to write the preceding public tribute to those who are kind enough to dedicate so much of their lives to making it possible for us readers of fantasy to sample precious stuff we would otherwise never see, and to dedicate this column to the works of these particular stragglers in the field.

Exorcisms and Ecstasies (by Karl Edward Wagner, edited by Stephen Jones; Fedogam & Bremer, Minneapolis, MN; 460 pages, hardcover, \$32.00) is a very handsome book, skillfully and lovingly produced. It contains a selection Karl Edward Wagner made of his stories just before his death to be published under the above title, plus an assemblage of all his unpublished work, even including a wry bit of juvenilia, that Stephen Jones could locate. There is also an extraordinary collection of tributes by people who loved Karl deeply, two fine cover montages and a repeated interior illustration by J.K. Potter, and there is even an extraordinarily touching photograph album with snaps of Karl as a baby all the way through to the dreadful latter years.

The result of this extraordinarily well-crafted assem-

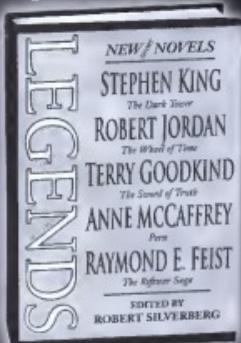
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blage is spookily like a kind of living thing along the lines of a voodoo doll or a reliquary, and please understand I do not say this to disparage or to mock. Quite on the contrary.

I don't know how it will hit those who never met Karl, although I suspect that if you really spend time with this remarkable book and pay full attention to it you will very nearly *have* met him.

My first reaction to this astounding structure was to be violently thrown into a huge flashback of the various stages of the sadness I'd been through with Karl. It was such a loss, and not just one loss but a whole series of them. Each time you saw him the damage was worse. He did not go easy; he went away bit by bit. It was surely a very hard way to die and it certainly was a very hard way to see him die.

Some of the stories that were to be in his original collection are no less than devastating. For example, if you are in any branch of the Creation Biz I earnestly recommend you put off reading "Did They Get You To Trade?" until you're having one of your stronger days. Almost all of the stories are one way or another about handling pain and a good many of those concentrate on the problems posed by empathy. Also Karl's medical background surges up repeatedly and to intensely chilling effect, as in "Passages," and I strongly suggest you do not put this volume in the hands of anyone recuperating in a hospital.

But do not despair, during those periods when you feel you might not be quite up to coping with facing the grimmer aspects of life with such extreme directness there are other stories amid the previously uncollected ones that Stephen Jones has gathered which are positively upbeat. The Solomon Kane series is robustly represented and ranges from the prologue to a long novel never written—and, by Crom, I do wish some small press entrepreneur had the occult connections to publish the completed version!—all the way to a naughty little tale featuring a Mina and Lucy (decidedly not Stoker's Mina and Lucy!) and their connection via a dildo cast from none other than Elvis Presley's private parts. There's also two highly enjoyable, wild and wooly samples from the uneven saga of the formidable Adrian Becker, a bold rover who survived campaigning with Quantrell and a career as a fearless gun-slinger but somehow never managed to show up in a finished novel (same request for Crom on this one as per above). Also one must not forget "The Education of Gergy-Doo-Doo," which won the 12-year-old Karl first prize in a contest held at Fountain City Grammar School back in 1957. Let us all thank Crom that this small masterpiece of preteen scatology was happily saved from oblivion!

The thing that really takes the black doom from the book, though, are the marvelous little essays by a wonderful bunch of people

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who knew Karl. People like Peter Straub and Frances Wellman and David J. Schow and Ramsey Campbell. They are all sad, of course, some are even bitter, but they all loved him and it is obvious they are all better for having come in contact with him.

I think it's more than possible that *Exorcisms and Ecstasies* will end by having the same effect on you should you choose to give it the chance.

Among his other activities, Karl Wagner was one of those people to whom this column is most affectionately dedicated, namely an editor and publisher of a small press which, by dint of enormous efforts and sizable sacrifices, managed to assemble and publish books of fantasy which none of the much larger, bottom-liner outfits would touch with a 10-foot CPA. Karl's brave little band dubbed themselves Carcosa, worked out of Chapel Hill, N.C., and produced a number of excellent books among which was *Murgunstrum and Others*, a collection of short stories by Hugh B. Cave, edited by Karl and illustrated by the weird and wonderful Lee Brown Coye. It is a dark beauty, that book, packed full with unabashed horrors. I have the honor to be caretaker of a copy of the pretty thing and it is one of those books you find yourself now and then gently lifting from its spot on the shelf just so you can fondle it a little and gaze at it adoringly.

Death Stalks the Night (by Hugh B. Cave, edited by Karl, illustrated by Lee Brown

Coye, Fedogan & Bremer, 510 pages, hardcover, \$29.00) follows exactly the same formula as dear old *Murgunstrum* did and that is because Karl Wagner himself is the one who put it together with the notion of bringing it out from Carcosa as a sequel, but Carcosa closed shop—sometimes even heroism is not enough—and the manuscript and Coye's illustrations languished in some North Carolina file cabinet until it occurred to the hardy bunch at Fedogan & Bremer to rescue it and bring it out and so they have, blessed their hearts.

With a book like this I feel a word of warning is very much in order at the start: This is not a book that everyone can handle. I don't mean that in the sense movie-maker William F. Castle did with his *The Tingler* or *The House on Haunted Hill* when he took solemn prologues onto his films warning the (hopefully) quaking audience that anyone who might be either emotionally or physically fragile ought to leave the theater before the feature began—though I suppose I do mean it that way in a sense—I just mean to caution any reader who has refined tastes and is not comfortable in the presence of bawdy, horrendously gory, totally over-the-top books might be well advised not to have anything to do with the likes of Hugh B. Cave. Although it might be fun if you got a copy of one of his books just so you could leave it in the guest bedroom the next time your prissy Aunt Nettie comes (the one who's always

complaining about how rude and thoughtless your children and spouse are) so that she might read a story or two before going to bed and therefore be found dead in the morning staring with bulging eyes up at the ceiling with a ghastly expression of horror frozen forever onto her cold, clammy face.

My goodness, did you read that? *Did you read THAT?* Actually it's a good example of what I'm talking about—just thinking about Hugh B. Cave is enough to make perfectly respectable reviewers, such as myself, go completely out of control and write his sort of thing. Now you've seen it for yourselves.

Cave is a survivor from the naughtiest days of the shocker pulps. The publishers of those gaudy magazines with their covers showing screaming, half-nude flappers staring out of closing iron maidens at chortling dirty old men (who were usually deformed to boot) didn't pay all that much per story, but if you cranked out enough of them you ended up living pretty high off the hog during the midst of the Depression.

The rules of the game were pretty simple: at least one shock a page high-impact horror, as much sexual naughtiness as the law allowed (and maybe a wee tad more), the luscious heroine plucked from the jaws of death at the very last moment, and the villain battered to a pulp by the bloody but unbowed hero.

So if my mentioning hunchbacked, face-

Continued on page 20.

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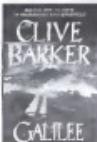
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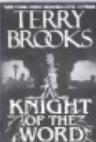
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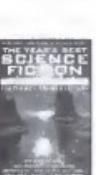
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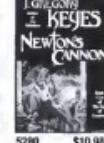
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less fiends spraying acid in your face and beautiful women caged with crawling maggots makes your lips curl in revulsion and disgust, please understand that the only reason anyone as gentle as myself is mentioning hunchbacked, faceless fiends spraying acid in your face and beautiful women caged with crawling maggots is to firmly warn you off buying or even thinking about buying anything written by Hugh B. Cave.

However, if you are kind of intrigued by the idea of hunchbacked, faceless fiends spraying acid in your face and beautiful women caged with crawling maggots, Hugh B. Cave is your kind of guy, buddy.

Be my guest.

The Door Below (by Hugh B. Cave, Fedogan & Bremer, 332 pages, hardcover, \$27.00). The same as previous except this one's edited by Cave himself, who has also contributed a general introduction and five other introductions specific to stories that appeared in the '30s, the '40s, the '70s, the '80s, and the '90s, all of which are very interesting, highly



informative, and an absolutely marvelous glimpse at how a talented and gutsy professional takes the passage of time and the changes of the world about him more or less in stride. Study it well, beginners!

Sadly there are no more illustrations by Lee Brown Coye, that lovely man having passed away before this book was shaped. The cover by Alan M. Clark skillfully and with fine drollery expresses the ghoulish mood required (he also stepped in to do the

same for *Death Stalks the Night*) and he provides a pleasantly spooky endpiece.

I had the great good fortune to be seated next to R. (which stands for Ronald) Chetwynd-Hayes on the occasion of his receiving his very well-deserved Life Achievement Award from the Horror Writers Association (at that point called the Horror Writers of America, I believe, but HWA either way) and he was an outstandingly delightful dinner companion. His eyes never stopped taking in his exotic surroundings and his soft-spoken observations on those surroundings were memorably hilarious and painfully accurate.

While his work is not all that well known in the United States, Chetwynd-Hayes has been a legend and beloved elder in British horror for some time now—I wouldn't presume to say how long—and *Vampire Stories*, (Fedogan & Bremer, 251 pages, hardcover, \$27.00) is a welcome chance for American readers to sample this tried-and-true master of urbane and chilling tales. The stories were expertly gathered by Stephen Jones, very wittily introduced by the redoubtable Brian Lumley, and if you're at all interested in vampiric doings you'd be cheating yourself not to indulge in the gory goodies presented.

The style and approach favored by the author are unabashedly a bit old-timey, occasionally even a bit avuncular with considerate little jokes strewn here and there to ease the visible starts and sudden tremblings which now and then visibly rack the eagerly listening nephews seated in his lap, but the underlying mood of the tales is outstandingly creepy and the genuine nastiness of his more evil bloodsuckers lingers in a positively sneaky way with the reader. Uncle Ron knows how to plant very spooky seeds in the brains of his little readers, never fear, and the dear old thing doesn't seem to mind doing it in the least.

For example, you have to be more than a little insidious to come up with the disconcerting notion of a vampire lurking within your very own subconscious so that it might take it into its nasty mind to start "crawling up your throat taking a nibble from your tonsils," but that itchy notion is blandly advanced in "The Fundamental Elemental";

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Highlander: The Complete Watcher's Guide, by Maureen Russell, Warner Aspect Trade paperback, \$13.99. Authorized watcher's guide of the hit television series *Highlander*. This book follows the show from start to finish. Interviews with the show's writers, fight choreographers, postproduction wizards, and more! "Players" of the

"piece" are listed alphabetically, episodes are listed and described, there are photographs and "behind-the-scenes" information. A fun and comprehensive guide for all fans of the series, and future fans as well.

Dragon, by Steven Brust, A Tor hardcover, \$22.95. This book is not only a marvelous tale—but a "fantasy event." A zesty, action-filled adventure featuring the assassin-turned-hero Vlad Taltos, of the popular series. This new novel revolves around an episode in Vlad's life story where he will find himself in the middle of two sorcerous armies. Featuring Vlad's reptile familiar Loiosh, and other favorite characters from the Vlad tales, this eagerly awaited saga is sure to excite followers of Brust's previous tales, as well as any lover of witty and epic adventure.

Nightsword: A Starshield Novel, by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, a Del Rey hardcover, \$24.95. Former book editor Weis teams up with game designer Hickman to create this galactic fantasy of good vs. evil. A blended tale of science fiction and fantasy—astronaut Jeremy Griffiths embarks on a quest. A man armed with infinite knowledge, the Nightsword lost among the ghost ships of a mad emperor's ill-fated journey, a universe where science and magic coexist... such is the fabric of this awesome adventure.

the ease with which a suburban yuppie might find himself (and, later on, herself) edging into enthusiastic chewings of the neighbors' jugulars is gazed upon in "Birth" with a sort of innocent thoughtfulness that lends the notion a disconcerting plausibility transparently designed to cause it to linger unpleasantly with the reader, and that same sort of suburb is haunted in "Looking for Something to Suck" (which is about as flat-out honest a title for a vampire fantasy as your reviewer's yet come upon) by a very hungry and totally merciless little blob of shadow with tendrils which, with the cooperation of a vile bit of spousal failure, is pretty much guaranteed to give those trusting nephews rashes of smashing nightmares.

If these odd departures from the norm inspire fear that R. Chetwynd-Hayes eschews the simple pleasures of the traditional Gothic vampire saga, put the notion out of your mind. There's nothing he does better than dark doings, your standard old house crumbling amidst lonesome winds in the drear isolation of a spreading moor. "Keep the Gaslight Burning," for example, follows all the rules, even to featuring a doughty lass of pure Bronte derivation as the heroine, but don't get smug—this one'll cause you to check the locks. And as for "The Labyrinth," well, 'twould be very hard indeed to discover any more enthusiastic, no-holds-barred job of describing a really severe case of vampire infestation!

So... light a thick, tall candle on your bedside table (trust me—you'll want to be sure it burns the whole night long), puff up your bolsters, jamb the back of a chair under the doorknob, and snuggle into your blankets with a copy of Uncle R. Chetwynd-Hayes's book from the folks at Fedogan & Bremer.

And may God have mercy on your soul.

Heartfire, by Orson Scott Card; TOR Books, NY; 304 pp.; hardcover, \$24.95.

Jumping into an ongoing fantasy series is always a tricky thing. If the author isn't careful to provide information about the characters, their relationships, and what has come before, you can be hopelessly confused. Even if the author works background into the text, if you jump in on the wrong book you may not be able to enjoy the story. A climax might lack any emotional impact, since you missed all the buildup.

On the other hand, by the time word of mouth reaches you about a terrific fantasy series, that series may be well under way, and the prospect of starting back at the beginning and trying to catch up may be daunting. I decided to take a chance with *Heartfire*, the fifth book in Card's "The Tales of Alvin Maker" series. And I was well rewarded.

This series provides a refreshingly original fantasy setting: colonial America. In this alternate history, magic exists. Many people

Continued on page 95

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HOBBIES: Pillaging, plundering, looting, sacking, ax-grinding, drunken carousing, and mayhem

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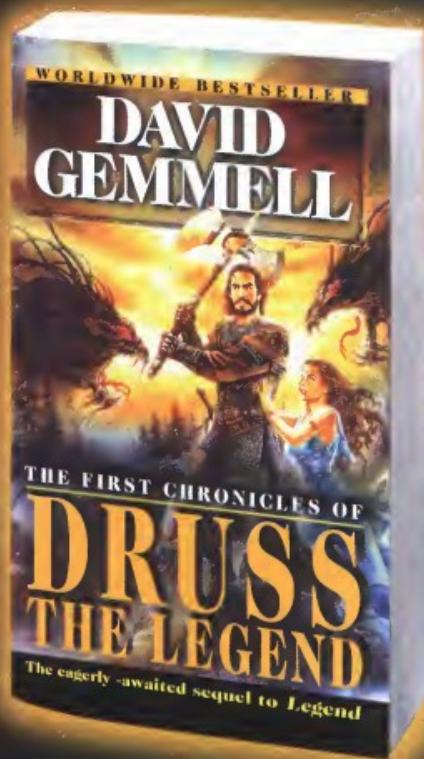
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into the path of the warriors behind him.

"Sieben pulled Snaga from the
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air. Druss caught the weapon smoothly.
Moonlight glittered from the terrible
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Making the Invisible World Visible: Brian Froud Brings Folklore to Life.

One fairy holds "The Mask of Truth" while another holds the sword of enlightenment in this faery portrait by Brian Froud.

A NEW BOOK EXPLORING FAERY LORE BOTH ANCIENT AND MODERN, GOOD FAERIES/BAD Faeries, appears on store shelves in October—and thus I've been asked by this magazine to interview the artistic genius behind it: English painter Brian Froud. This is a particularly congenial assignment since Brian is a neighbor of mine, living just a few miles away in the same small Dartmoor village. The Froud family's thatched-roof farmhouse sits buried in ivy down a quiet country lane, and its old front door (with a goblin door knocker) is a doorway into Faerieland. Inside is the kind of enchanted house one usually finds only in fantasy books: full of carved medieval furniture, Pre-Raphaelite fabrics, costumes, masks, old books, puppets, Victorian toys, and magical props from films. Faeries, goblins,

trolls, and sprites stare down from Brian's paintings on the walls—and cavort in the shape of dolls created by his wife Wendy, a sculptor. On the day chosen for the interview I find the Frouds in the garden studio, building a three-dimensional Faerieland out of roots, bracken, and moss. Wendy has created dozens of faery figures (ranging from a sensuous sleeping Titania to grinning goblins and trolls) and now they are being photographed for a book to be published next year. Brian fusses with ferns, mushrooms, and adjusts a goblin's foot; "morning mist" is created with beekeepers' smoke, then the scene is ready to shoot. In between photographs, Brian sits down to talk about the process of bringing myth to life—and how he came to devote so many years to the faeries of Dartmoor.

Brian's deep involvement with folklore and myth began during his art-student days, when he came across a book by Arthur Rackham in his college library. This master illustrator evoked the wonder of childhood with fey and richly animate landscapes, re-awakening Brian's interest in fairy tales and their imagery. He began to study the folklore of Britain, and then the tales of other lands—fascinated by the ways the magical traditions in all cultures shared common roots. When he left college, he spent five years working in the field of commercial illustration in London, but he continued to paint mythic images and to develop a distinctive style of his own. In the mid-'seventies, Brian's early mythic art was published in *Once Upon a Time* (a survey of modern English illustration) and collected in *The Land of Froud*, both from David Larkin's Peacock Press.

In 1975, Brian moved from London to the misty Dartmoor countryside, sharing a house with fellow-illustrator Alan Lee and his family. The two collaborated on *Faeries*, a lavishly illustrated book of British faery lore—which subsequently became a best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic. Brian's magical vision of the world so impressed the American filmmaker Jim Henson (creator of the Muppets) that he hired Brian to create two feature films: *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*. It was on the set of the first movie that Brian met Wendy, a puppet designer who created the "gelflings" and other creatures. By the time of the second film they'd married and their son, Toby, was born. (He played the baby stolen by David Bowie's Goblin King in *Labyrinth*.) In the decade since,



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Faery forms (such as this "Collection of Pixies") are often distorted, says Brian, for we glimpse them in a moment of transformation from one shape to the next.

although Brian still designs for film and other media, he has largely concentrated on what could be called "faery portraiture"—producing a stunning body of work to be published this fall for the first time.

"I've been actively engaged with mythic imagery ever since I picked up that Rackham book," says Brian, "but it really came into focus for me when I moved from London to the country. As I walked the extraordinary landscape of Dartmoor, I looked at the trees and the rocks and the hills and I could see the personality in those forms... then they metamorphosed under my pencil into faeries, goblins, and trolls. After Alan and I published *Faeries*, he moved on from the subject of faery folklore to illustrate Tolkien and other literary works... while I discovered that my own exploration of Faerieland had only just begun. In the countryside, the old stories seemed to come alive around me; the faeries were a tangible aspect of the landscape, pulses of spirit, emotion, and light. They insisted on taking form under my pencil, emerging on the page before me cloaked in archetypal shapes drawn from nature and myth. I'd attracted their attention, you see, and they hadn't finished with me yet."

"After completing the two Henson films, I returned to my Dartmoor studio and began to paint the faeries once more—listening to the mythic voice of the landscape, transcribing it through images. Although I love book art and design, I lost interest in being an 'illustrator'—at least as so many modern illustrators (and art directors) seem to define

the term: that is, they attempt to render a scene precisely as an author has described it. To me, this just isn't interesting. If a writer has already done a good job of painting a picture in a reader's mind, why should I reproduce it? I'm more interested in what takes place around the corner, what we haven't already seen, what lies between the words of a text. In book art, I want the picture to complement or comment on the text without simply reproducing it, creating a world of its own that the viewer can step into and explore. I turned down illustration jobs and concentrated instead on painting my faery pictures—pictures that would tell their own stories. From a purely commercial point of view, this seemed to be a risky decision....but I knew deep inside I was on the right track, and so I soldiered on. Increasingly my art fell into a grey area between what's commonly perceived of as 'fine art' (for gallery exhibition) and 'illustration' (for book publication). I intended my pictures for both environments, and this initially met with some resistance. For a long while it seemed as though no one but the faeries and my friends would ever see this new work.

"I'm often called a 'fantasy' painter, but my imagery springs from myth, folklore, and the old oral storytelling tradition, not from the modern fantasy genre—although I'm enormously grateful for the support genre readers have given me over the years. I have to confess that (unlike Wendy) I rarely read fiction at all. Most of my reading is non-fiction: history, mythology, archetypal psychology, and the like. I prefer the enchantment of a story told rather than one that is written down. In the oral tradition, where stories are told around the fireplace in semi-darkness, the words are alive: They leave the lips, enter into the air, and before they fall onto your ear they transform themselves into magic. They're not fixed; they change from telling to telling, and from listener to listener. I want my pictures to have that same quality of mutability. I don't want things to be fixed too solidly or explained too fully; I want each viewing to be like a retelling of a tale, full of new possibilities. Back in my illustration days, I remember working on a book called *The Wind Between the Stars* and that was a great technical challenge, for how does one draw the wind? Most of what I do today still has that sort of challenge: drawing things that are normally beyond human perception, turning the invisible world of Faerie into visible form. Myth surrounds us every day, particularly

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in a landscape as soaked in history and old stories as Dartmoor. If I do my job well, not only does myth become visible within a painting, but that painting becomes a doorway into a new way of looking at the world. You turn and look at the land around you, and you begin to see the faces in the trees and faeries flitting through the shadows.

"Part of the challenge in painting faeries is to convince the viewer that what I've depicted is true, that I've got it right. When Cocteau was making his classic film *Beauty & the Beast*, he strove for what he called 'the supernatural within realism'—in other words, grounding fantastical elements with ordinary imagery, which gives plausibility to the first and enchantment to the second. I think this is important to mythic art no matter what the medium: drawing, writing, filmmaking. You need realism as an underpinning, an anchor, for the magic. In order to do this, I usually start my large, complex paintings with a human image. The familiarity of the human form provides a touchstone and a reference—and then as we continue on in our journey around the picture, encountering stranger and stranger imagery, we have confidence that these faeries look just as they're supposed to look. We know that the distortions in their forms or faces are deliberate, not just a stylistic aberration or bad drawing. Every distortion in my paintings actually has a precise meaning behind it. In traditional lore, one often finds that



Brian's quick pencil drawings, such as this wild "Green Woman," provide fleeting bright windows directly into Faerie-land.

faeries have some striking defect of form: some are hollow-backed or elongated, others have goat- or lion-feet. Heads, hands, and feet are often large in proportion to the rest of the body. This is due to the plastic nature of faery forms, which are often glimpsed in states of transition from one shape to the next.

"I start each painting by drawing a geometrical grid based on the Golden Section, a system of proportions and perspective developed by the ancient Greeks. The grid is overlaid with circles, triangles, and the like... and where these things cross over is where I place the major figures. This gives the 'chaos' of a crowded painting an underlying structure of order. The central human figure is generally based on a photograph—again, this provides an underpinning of reality for the more fantastical aspects. I take my own photographs of models: friends and neighbors generally. The imagery surrounding the central figure is always in relationship to it. These secondary creatures are often drawn from earlier sketches—I have many, many sketchbooks filled with such things. I keep the drawing fairly loose; I don't like to get tight at this stage, which would close down possibilities. And even in the final stages of a painting I strive to maintain a looseness and a sense of mystery. I find that some fantasy genre painters tend to over-paint their pictures; they're a bit too... over-wrought for my taste. When I look at them I find them much too bright and shiny. The artist has finished every detail, and every edge is hard and bright—which doesn't allow me into their world, my eye slides right off that shiny surface. I prefer to keep the rendering as loose as possible, just on the edge of being finished. I want a painting to give just enough information for the picture to make

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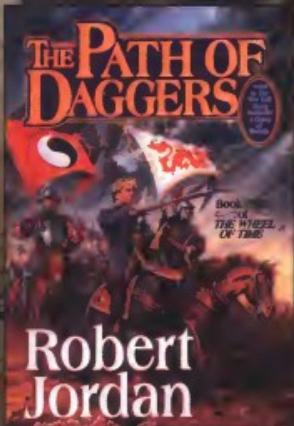
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This book will also include a bonus novella and an interview plus art gallery with Heather J. McKinney, the artist who brings us the new look of Lena Banks. (Actual rear cover art to left.)

sense; there should always be a little bit kept back, a few pieces missing, which the viewer must supply himself. In doing that, the picture comes to life. It becomes part of a reciprocal process, a communication. The painting allows you inside, where it can grow, and you can grow.

"After years of painting faeries, I'm often asked if I 'believe' in them. The best answer I can give is that I don't have much of a choice in whether I believe in them or not, for they seem to insist on my painting them. I paint by intuition, and faeries keep appearing on the page before me. Mind you, it's not that I lie around on a *chaise longue* waiting for inspiration to strike—painting is a discipline and I'm in my studio working a regular workday from 9 to 5. But on a Monday morning I'm often not sure what exactly I'm going to be doing next. I'll get out my tools, I'll get to work, and something will demand to come through—some creature will form on the page before me, demanding to say "Hello!" When I'm working at my best, I try to step aside and allow for this spontaneity. I try not to let rigid ideas or fussing about technique step in the way. In capturing faery imagery, I find it useful to have a variety of different tools at hand: acrylics, pencils, watercolor, photography. The large, formal paintings are done in acrylics, with imagery built up in layer upon layer. These can take up to a month to complete and are quite laborious—so more and more I've been enjoying working on a smaller scale: pencil drawings with watercolor washes that I can do quite quickly. There's something particularly magical about the smaller drawings, portraying the fleeting essence of Faerie and giving me moments of bright insight in ways that the larger works cannot.

"It's really quite extraordinary that it has taken over 10 years to get this new faery work into print. There were times when I thought I was mad to continue on with it... but I was driven to do it; I had a vision and I couldn't seem to let it go. Despite the worldwide success of *Faeries*, there has been remarkable resistance from publishers about doing a new book on the subject. It was quite frustrating for many years. Publishers would ask me to paint dragons, or vampires, or some other such thing—and they wouldn't believe that there was interest in the kind of art I actually do. So I said to myself: What do I have to do to convince a publisher that there's an audience for my faery art? I decided a humorous approach might open the door; it might perhaps be less intimidating than a 'serious' book on the subject. That's when the idea for *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book* came to mind. I asked my friend Terry Jones (of Monty Python fame) to write the text—and the success of that volume made it possible to do *Good Faeries/Bad Faeries*, the book I always wanted to do. I suppose, in retrospect, that the time just wasn't right for the faeries. Fortunately that's

Continued on page 40

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BY DAN PEREZ

The newest Highlander continues the Immortal legacy, quoth The Raven.

IT'S NOT NEWS THAT FANTASY TELEVISION HAS BEEN BOOMING IN SYNDICATION LATELY. Direct-to-syndication shows like *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and others have become consistent winners, drawing audiences away from the networks and cable channels. One such show has been *Highlander: The Series*, a part of the lucrative *Highlander* franchise, which got its start in the 1986 movie version starring Christopher Lambert and Sean Connery. The successful film spawned two sequels as well as the television series, which starred Adrian Paul. *Highlander: The Series* ran for six seasons, consistently ranking high among first-run television action hours, and a fourth movie, with series star Adrian Paul, is in the works as well. Now a new chapter in the saga of sword-wielding Immortals is about to debut in the form of *Highlander: The Raven*.

The new show features 1,200-year-old Immortal con artist and thief Amanda (played by former Miss America Elizabeth Gracen), the longtime on-again/off-again lover of Duncan MacLeod. MacLeod passes her the sword and she finds herself teamed up with an ex-cop named Nick Wolfe (Paul Johansson) as they fight together against injustice. The international production, headed by Gaumont Studios, will be filmed in Toronto and Paris.

RIGHT: *Highlander: The Series* reinvents itself as The Raven with fan favorite Amanda (Elizabeth Gracen) wielding the leading role.



"We knew that *Highlander* and the Adrian Paul epoch was coming to a close," says executive producer Marla Ginsburg. "There's only so many years you can pretend you're immortal before you get humanly tired. And so we started talking about how we could spin off the Highlander, because we have a very loyal audience, we love making it, and it's been a great series. We didn't want to stop and there seemed to be an interest in the marketplace as well, for the series. So what we did was start looking at it, and I felt very strongly that it would be a good idea to have a female Immortal like Amanda, who might take his place, because to me, to replace Adrian with any other man would be to make it *Highlander* but without Adrian, and that would be a shame. But to make it a woman very much changed the nature of it. So that's what we did."

The idea of a strong female heroine was nothing new to the producer. "We had just finished putting together the package on *[La Femme] Nikita*, which Gaumont was involved in packaging," says Girsburg, "and I felt like, you know, it's the time of the strong woman."

Gracen was a natural choice to build the series around, according to Girsburg. "We've always loved the character of Amanda since Elizabeth first walked on our set, and it was a really appropriate way to go."

Did Girsburg consult *Highlander*'s considerable fan base in making any decisions? "I really respect and appreciate our fans, but I believe in my own personal creative judgment," she says, "and while I knew Elizabeth had a high response among the fan base, I also knew they might be upset without having Adrian. So I think the smartest thing you can do in this case is just trust your own judgment. The fact that the fans love Elizabeth is a plus."

Paul Johansson, a veteran of film and television (along with some sexy Diet Coke commercials) had never appeared on *Highlander* before. "Paul came to us by our casting director," says Girsburg. "We were looking for a man who was somebody that we believed could provide a sound and stable relationship, and we also wanted to take the *Highlander* away from being a single star-driven series to a duo. And we felt that Paul had the combination of strong masculinity and yet was sort of sensitive—he kind of had it all. We liked him both as a person and as a performer to be

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the complement to her character."

Regarding the locations for shooting, Ginsburg says, "Paris has been just great. I mean, we've done it in the past, and I live here, so it's fun for me to be able to be home and do my work. [Toronto] has a good film infrastructure, and it serves as the co-production; we like the partners, it's a metropolitan city that looks fairly neutral so you don't necessarily feel you're in Canada. There were a lot of reasons for [the locations]: partly creative and partly financial."

Do the two different locations make for any difficulties for the stars of the show? "You'd have to ask them," says Ginsburg. "But my hunch is that they like changing locations—it makes it more interesting. The ideal thing is to be able to work and be at home, but since this series isn't going to allow them to be in LA, nobody gets too upset about spending some time in Paris."

Ginsberg admits to not having attended any of the *Highlander* conventions. "Bill [Panzer, co-executive producer] is more the convention guy," she notes. "I kind of isolate my activities to the creative, and the production of the series. Bill really listens to the fans a lot. I try not to, because I think someone needs to have a pure perspective, and so I'm of the one who stands outside of the fan base. I don't check what people are saying, and I don't go to the Web site. I'm aware of it and I care deeply what it says, but I think one of the assets I bring to the



ABOVE: For 1200 years Amanda (Elizabeth Gracen) has lived as a con artist and a thief.

show is a certain perspective. When you listen to the fans a lot, or when you go to the Web site a lot, it's sort of like trying to please a lover. You try to give them what they want, and that's a really important role, but I also think somebody needs to stand outside that process and say, 'You know what? I'm not a part of that, but here's what I think.' It's a pure, objective

creativity that comes from no other bias but my own personal one. I think it's part of what gave us the courage to have a female Immortal, and in the beginning that was not a popular idea, but it was something I really fought for because I believed in it and I didn't care what anyone else thought. I think there have been times that that has served a purpose and there have been other times that I've had no idea what I was talking about, and I was completely wrong. But I think there have been times where that sort of distant observation that I'm able to lend by not being too wrapped up in that stuff has been good.

"I remember when I first went to see Bill Panzer in Canada about doing the series, and I was pregnant, and I never knew whether or not he said yes just so I wouldn't break my water, or because he liked it, but I had a real vision for the series, and I really wanted to do it. I recently had occasion to go back and look at what I originally wrote and it was exciting to see that those few pages I had given him so many years ago really still pertained."

The current slate of episodes, according to Ginsburg, is 20 instead of the usual 22. As for why, she says with a laugh, "You know, it beats the hell out of me. It's sort of a combination between the broadcasters, the distributors, and the financier and I think a lot of it has to do with cash flow."

Ginsburg says that she loves the syndi-

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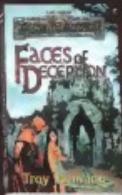
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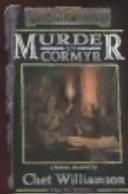
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cated market. "Everyone tells me what a terrible market it is, but I've been in it—this will be year number eight, and I don't know what they're talking about. We've got a wonderful distributor behind us with Rysher. We've been with Rysher since they were a teeny, tiny company that nobody knew. Rysher's been with Gaumont and *Highlander* since nobody could pronounce Gaumont and didn't know who we were. We're two companies who really launched ourselves into the marketplace together, and we're very proud of and loyal to that relationship.

Ginsburg says that as a producer, the biggest challenge in working on *Highlander* is "jet lag. I work between Toronto, LA, and Paris, so I'm often up at three in the morning working. The other big problem is juggling a lot of diverse personalities with me in the middle as the messenger, which means I often get shot. And it hurts sometimes. That's difficult. I'd say always finding the energy to be fresh each year. It's a challenge to always be able to approach something that you've done year in and year out with a freshness . . . we work with a really great group of people and that keeps you moving forward. But the French are French, the Germans are Germans, and the Americans are Americans, and there's a reason why we're not all called 'people on the planet.' We are different, and I'm the person who's been vested with the respon-



ABOVE: Amanda's partner, ex-cop Nick Wolfe (Paul Johansson), fights the corrupt legal system.

sibility of getting all these people to agree or disagree and share that point of view with the creative staff."

The balancing factor that makes it worthwhile, Ginsburg says, is "success. I love it that people love the show. I mean, there's nothing greater, when you're in a creative business, I don't think, than imagining something, trying to get it done, finding a

way to do it, and then people actually like it. That's a kick. It's not like we go to CBS and they give me \$850,000 or a million dollars and I go make a TV show and Warner Bros. distributes it. I've got to raise every penny. I'm the person who is responsible for doing that and it's hard. I'm on planes a lot, and I'm the mother of two small children, which makes it hard. But on the other hand, it's really exciting to be working on something people love. And people seem to really love this thing. What greater reward is there? Except maybe a house on the Riviera!"

In closing, Ginsburg stresses that *Highlander* is, above all, a team effort. "A huge amount of thinking and blood, sweat, and tears go into making it good, and the people who do this show really do have a passion that I have never seen on any other show that I've worked on. [Head writer] David Abramowitz and Bill Panzer put in incredible hours, painstakingly reviewing everything that goes into the show. There's something like a hundred people who bring it to the screen and it's easy to give the credit to Paul and Elizabeth, but there's also the writing staff and everyone down to the catering. The *Highlander* team stayed together for years, and I hope the *Raven* team will, as well. The fact that the fans love it is the reward. It really is a pleasure because, much like *Star Trek*, it's really found a place in cult fiction." ■



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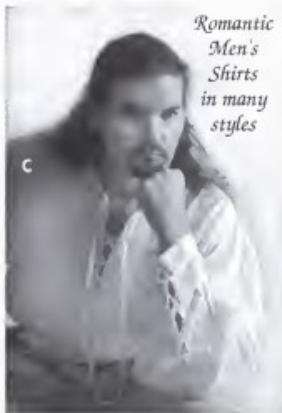
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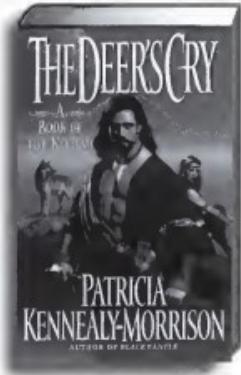
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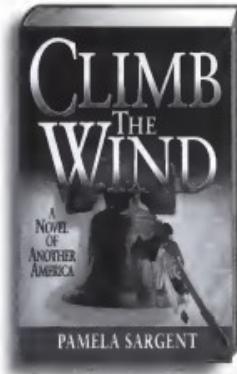


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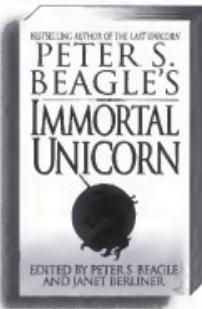
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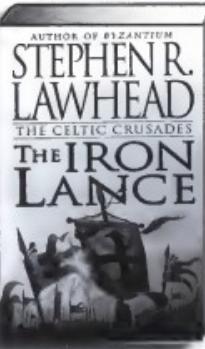
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Owings Mills, Maryland — The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the brand new North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in **ONLY ONE** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

The National Library of Poetry
Suite 17515
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Or enter online at www.poetry.com

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound



Gordon Steele of Virginia, pictured above, is the latest Grand Prize Winner in The National Library of Poetry's North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. As the big winner, he was awarded \$1,000.00 in cash.

anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream, Days of Future's Past, Of Diamonds and Rust, and Moments More to Go*, among others.

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changed now. There have been two major movies recently (*Photographing Fairies* and *A Fairy Tale*), and my wife has just been asked to work on a new animated faery film. The Victorian fairy art show was a big hit in both London and Canada last year, and is opening in New York this autumn—while the Burne-Jones show at the Met in New York is filled with fairy tales and myths. Even the fashion industry has jumped on the faery bandwagon. I'm not entirely sure why the time for faeries has come right now. Perhaps it's a *fin de siècle* phenomenon, since the last big interest in the subject was at the turn of the last century. Or perhaps it's simply the next trend after angels. Faeries are more intimate, less daunting. Angels are rather lofty, imposing creatures—whereas one can have a relationship with a little nature spirit at the bottom of the garden.

Mythologists and psychologists like Joseph Campbell, James Hillman, and Clarissa Pinkola Estes have done much good work to popularize the notion that the symbols of myth and folklore have much to offer to modern life. Traditional cultures have always recognized and honored the animate spirits of the earth, but in western culture we've rather left that behind, to our spiritual cost, and ecological peril. Now we're beginning to recognize how important it is to have a vibrant relationship with the land beneath our feet—and that the old stories and mythic imagery can aid this process. Joseph Campbell has said that artists are the 'shamans and myth-makers' of our modern world, charging us with the sacred task of keeping myth alive. I hope my pictures will do their part in helping to keep myth, and the faeries, alive for the next generations.

"I have several new projects in the works now, all involved with myth and spirit, if not precisely with faeries. But I don't think I'll ever leave the faeries behind completely—I don't think they'd let me! Wherever fate may take me and Wendy next, I'm sure the faeries will come along, hanging onto my coat-tails as usual....There's an old story about a household faery that was so loud, unruly, and generally annoying that the family of the house, unable to banish the creature, decided to move. They packed up all their bags and bundles and finally the wagon was ready to roll. Whereupon the faery appeared on the wagon, a big grin covering his face. 'Ach, and it's a fine day for moving house,' he declared, and went along with them." *

Good Faeries/Bad Faeries by Brian Froud will be published by Simon & Schuster in October. More information can be found on their Web site: www.SimonSays.com. Brian and Wendy Froud's work, as well as previous Folkroots columns, can also be found on the Endicott Studio Web site: www.endicott-studio.com.

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Everyone wishes their kids would listen to them better and obey them instantly. Everyone wishes their kids were less selfish and more sensitive to the needs of others. Until now...

THE PLIABLE CHILD

I PRAYED TO GOD, Jesus, and Gracie Steinmetz that night, the night Doc Welland said, "Not much time now, I'm afraid," and Dee was finally forced to take to bed for good (though there was nothing good about it). And that was kind of odd, I guess, not because I'd never been the praying sort, but because I had somehow included Gracie in the mix. Until her name crossed my lips, I can't say I'd really thought about her all that much in recent years. No, not much at all, which made my invocation stranger still.

BY MICHAEL LIBLING
Illustration by Charles Demorat



T WASN'T THAT GRACIE and her family were unremarkable; in fact, the contrary was true. It was just that we'd seen an awful lot of folks come and go and a lot of oddball things happen; this was the sort of neighborhood it was back then. No sooner would somebody move out than another would move in, and the next drama would crackle through the air like the latest episode of *Ma Perkins*. Anchors were few and far between: Dee and me, the Gambols over on Thorn, Mrs. Kohner on Arbutus and, as far as homeowners went, that was about it, I think; the Amsol Shoe Company and Harbinger Bank had pretty well divvied up all the remaining mortgages. So Edison Heights was mostly families passing through on their way to something better or, more likely in those years before the war, on their way to something worse.

You name it, we'd seen it, and put up with it. The Agger Hensel type who'd steal your garden to plant their own and look you straight in the eye when you mentioned how their rose bushes looked familiar—"a lot like the yellow briars we used to have up front there." The ones who'd hooch and howl from dusk to dawn, carrying on as if they'd kill each other, but instead would skin your cat if you called the cops or dared to shout them down across the way. And some, too, whom you didn't much mind at all. The Cal and Betty McClary type who'd borrow flour and pay you back with sticky buns and gingersnaps. The ones who'd mow your lawn just because they happened to be clipping their own. The ones who'd listened to *Jack Benny* and were still chuckling at the same things you were, come Monday morning.

Like I said, we'd seen them all. So when Dee dragged me away from my noontime *Farm and Home Hour* on NBC Blue to get a gander at the latest bunch moving in that spring, I wasn't exactly awestruck by the notion.

"So the kid is wearing mittens in the middle of the day, so what?"

"Not just mittens, Joe, but oven mitts. You don't think that's just the least bit strange? It's 70 degrees out there, to say the least."

"For crying out loud, Dee. It's a kid. Kids do things like that."

"She's cute. Like Shirley Temple."

"Heck, Dee, every kid looks like Shirley Temple to you."

"Well, she really does. All those curls ... my goodness! Oh, and look! They've a boy, too."

Dee sized them up, and when I heard the coffee perking, I knew she figured this latest lot would be okay. "Be a dear, Joe, and squeeze me a few lemons. Not fair if I don't bring a treat for the little ones, too."

So, with a pitcher of lemonade in one hand and a pot of coffee in the other, I followed Dee across the yard to greet the newest batch. She carried the tray, of course, a plate of her famous oatmeal cookies and enough cups to cover the two of us, should they be the sort to invite us to sit and chat.

The boy, about 14 or so, was the first to notice our arrival, but all he did was *notice*. He backhanded the hair out of his eyes and took us in like some mutt deciding on what to bite first. Meanwhile, Dee and I, hands full, stood smiling, as dopey as the plaster elves in Mrs. Kohner's front yard. Dee started to introduce herself, the kid shrugged us off and headed back to the pickup before she completed her *Hello*.

"Maybe it's a language problem," I ventured, hoping Dee would take the hint and turn around. Instead, she let rip with the shrillest "Yoo-hoo!" I'd ever heard come out of her tiny mouth. (Like the spout of a teapot it was then, really, so much so I spent my life half-expecting her to whistle every time she spoke.)

Anyhow, *yoo-hoo* did the trick.

The father abandoned the cast-iron lamp and hideous shade he was carrying and sauntered over, measuring Dee and me every cautious step of the way. If mistrust walked on two legs, we'd just meet it face to face.

We told him our names and, fists in his pockets, he warily muttered his. Gabriel Steinmetz, he said, and I knew from the way he followed through on each syllable, I'd never call the man Gabe. Hell, I doubt if I'd manage a Gabriel. He was tall, maybe six-three or so, and just about as skinny as the jump rope in his little girl's hands, hands buried in oven mitts that we now saw were tied to her wrists with frayed twine. She hung close by her daddy's side, curiosity in her eyes and a smile, on a real short leash, on her lips. But that was all Dee needed. With every tooth in her mouth flashing, she kneeled to the girl's level and said, "Hello, I'm Mrs. Gerritson. Would you like a cookie?"

What took place next is one of those things that shake you up when they happen, and shake you up all over again when you think of it 10 or 20 or 40 years later—if you got a mind that still works, that is.

The mom, who must have been watching from inside the bungalow, tore onto the veranda, slammed the screen door behind her, and flew toward us in a flurry of apron strings, hemlines, and ravaging lunacy. "Who are you?" she wailed. "Who are you?" she shouted, words like chestnuts exploding out of a fire, her mouth obliterating what should have been a pretty face. Brown eyes and sandy-colored hair, curly like her daughter's.

Fact was, the banshee swept down on us so fast, the only parts of Dee and me that moved were our hearts drumming into our mouths. Without stopping for so much as a breath, let alone a how-de-do, she planted herself between Dee and her daughter and, next thing we knew, the tray was soaring up over Dee's head, cups and cookies flipping all over the place.

I gawked at Dee and Dee gawked at me and, together, we gawked at our new neighbors. Heck, what did these people have against oatmeal cookies that could stir them up so much?

Steinmetz glared at us through eyes so narrow they could have slit our throats. Hanging back, alongside the truck, the boy watched glumly, a tire iron, or the like, weighing down his right arm. And smack in front of us, the lady of the household, fists clenched, stance akin to Jimmy Cagney making like a gangster, just itching for a fight from apex to ankle. There was no breeze to speak of. But the way she spoke to us, with her little girl peeking out from behind, chilled us through to the bone and then some.

"We know you and your kind. You and your offerings. We know what you want. You aren't the first and you won't be the last. But I will tell you this, and the same goes for all your ilk, you dare lay a hand on her—you so much as breathe on her, and I promise you, you'll pay."

At this point, I suspect, Dee was about to say something about

THEY HAD PASSED JUDGMENT ON US
AND DOING WE COULD SAY OR DO.
WAS GOING TO ALTER THE VERDICT

there being a misunderstanding and that we didn't know what she was raving on about, but Mrs. Steinmetz wasn't done. She hauled her daughter out from behind her, set her hands upon the girl's shoulders, and propped the child before us like some cardboard dress-me-up doll. "Take a good look. A good long look. She's a five-year-old girl. That's all she is and nothing more. You got that? A five-year-old girl and nothing more." She ran short of breath and I was sure the tears were going to flow, but she sucked back the pain and resumed her tirade. "I know who she is, because I've raised her from my womb to where she's standing now. I am her mother and that man is her father and that boy is her brother and that is all there is to it. You got that? You got that? A five-year-old girl and nothing more."

Frankly, we didn't get any of it, then. But the both of us knew that asking questions or trying to explain wasn't going to get us any closer to the answers. They had passed judgment on us and nothing we could say or do was going to alter the verdict.

I watched as Dee gathered up her tray and the scattered cups—the ones that weren't broken, that is. I would have helped, except I still held the coffee pot and lemonade pitcher. Slowly, we headed back to our own yard. We were mighty rattled, to say the least, and it didn't make a whole lot of sense for us to glance back, but neither Dee nor I could help ourselves. Too bad, too. Because our eyes zoomed right to the little girl's oven mitts again, only this time we saw the palms were soaked with blood.

WELL, YOU CAN'T JUDGE a book by its cover and, like I reassured Dee, you can't judge a family based on their moving-in day. Moving is stressful at the best of times, and the last thing some folks want is strangers horning in on their privacy. I didn't believe a word of this, of course, but I thought it the best way to deal with Dee. She was eating herself up alive over the incident, racking her brains as to what could have caused all that hostility. And, every 10 minutes or so, she'd slip into this sorry lament: "My, my, my ... that poor little honey and her hands. I wonder if she's seeing a doctor, Joe. I hope she's seeing a doctor, Joe. She needs to see a doctor, Joe. Imagine, not being able to afford proper dressings. Those poor people. Maybe if I brought them some gauze or Maybe then they'd see we meant no harm. It'd be so nice to have a little girl next door to talk to. My, my, my ..." I nodded a lot, poured us each a cup of the coffee the new neighbors refused, and finally escaped over to the Philco, warmed it up just in time to catch *The Goldbergs*. But I didn't hear much of the show. Out of nowhere, both Dee and I came down with the nastiest of belly aches you can imagine. Shooting pains doubled us over for hours and kept us indoors for days.

ISUPPOSE YOU'D CALL IT a truce of sorts. The Steinmetzes stayed out of our way and we did our best to stay out of theirs. As my mother always said, good fences make good neighbors. But it continued to drive Dee nuts about the little girl. Fact was, the longer we went without having any kids of our own, the more Dee longed for them; and, believe me, we'd been trying for kids for years.

Sometimes Dee would secrete herself behind the shrubs or alongside the hammock on the front porch and stand there watching the kid at play. Occasionally, the little girl would spy Dee and hurry inside; other times, her mother or father or brother would tow her in. And sometimes, she smiled back at Dee before slinking into the shadows, leaving half a grin and half a wave behind. We never did see her without the oven mitts, though. Her hands were taking a heck of a long time to heal. If there'd been such a thing as child welfare workers or even a truant officer in the county, I'm sure Dee would have had them breathing down the Steinmetzes' necks. Anyhow, that's the way it went until the night I saw Agger Hensel doing

his dirty work on the Steinmetzes' front steps.

First week in the neighborhood, Agger stole our yellow briars. Second week, he set fire to the sheds in the alley behind Holland Avenue. Third week, he cleaned out Cal McClary's garage—tools, shovels, rakes, and all. Fourth week, because they dared accuse him, he tossed a brick through the McClarys' window and banged up Betty McClary's shoulder. Fifth week, he was suspected of raping a cashier at the Woolworth's over in Easton. And every week after that, he did some other nasty thing that no one managed to pin on him. (Even if we could've nailed him, it wouldn't have done much good. The Edison Heights police department had been whittled down to Al Beauchamp by then, and even 10 Als wouldn't have been a match for one Agger.) So seeing the lout making more mischief was no surprise. The only mystery was why it took him so long to zero in on the Steinmetzes.

Now you might ask what I was doing up and about at 1:00 am in the first place. With no Jack Paar or Johnny Carson to keep you up, early to bed and early to rise was the rule of thumb for most in those days. But all the answer you need is found in the four sweetest words in the English language: Dee's chocolate layer cake. It had been on my mind since the sliver I'd tucked away at dinner. I'd been trying to shed a few pounds and cutting back on desserts was as good a place as any to begin. But the cake knew my name and didn't stop calling it until I moseyed down to the kitchen. Lighter than air and as chocolaty as a tubful of melted Hershey's, nothing soothed the soul better. *Comfort food*, Dee called it.

I heard the commotion before I saw it. To some ears, a shout in the dead of night can sound like cannon fire, and I must have leaped a good yard off the floor (without, I proudly add, losing a crumb of cake). I suspected a cat was the cause—they make the weirdest noises, come dark, but saw right away it was our local hell raiser raising hell; there was no mistaking that palooka. With only the moonlight to go by, however, I couldn't quite make out his victim. When I spotted the little girl shivering in the shadows, though, I had a pretty good idea as to whom it might be. I just couldn't fathom why Agger was bothering; if he had watched the Steinmetzes move in (and he had), he would have known they didn't have a thing worth dick.

Without second thought, I hitched up my pajamas and high-tailed it over to the Steinmetzes; they had no phone. (No electricity either from what I'd gathered; come sundown, kerosene lamps flickered in their windows.) If I had given it a second thought, I suppose, I might have just gone back to bed. After all, I didn't like the Steinmetzes much and they sure didn't like me or Dee. Still, they'd done nobody any real harm and to leave them to the likes of Agger Hensel would have stuck in my craw worse than the bad liver Dee had fried up last Valentine's. Truth be known, I'd been itching to get back at him for those briars he stole; of course, I never stopped to reason exactly how I was going to manage my revenge.

The boy was down on the porch like a busted calf, wind knocked out of him, chest as deep as a wash basin. His sister huddled silently up against the screen door, absorbing the drama unfolding about her, but with a composure that bordered on detachment; it was the first time I'd seen her without the oven mitts. Straddling Agger's back was Mrs. Steinmetz, her arms wrapped around the Neanderthal's neck, tugging and clawing and punching, but she might as well have been a gnat for all the impact she was having. Beneath Agger was Mr. Steinmetz, his body slammed zigzag against the steps in ways that defied both zigging and zagging, swats and slaps and punches raining down on him like fragments from a cluster bomb. I could hardly believe that this twig of a man still had fight in him. He tore at Agger's face, fingers digging for eyes, thumbs jammed up nostrils and boring for brains. Agger retaliated with his teeth, jaws clamped tight on the heels of Steinmetz's hands, rivulets of blood glistening in the moonlight, and then I realized, it wasn't that Steinmetz wouldn't let go, *he couldn't let go*.

I've never been the violent sort. Fact is, violence makes my gut go queasy, while the rest of me turns to runny jelly. But I felt for this man and I felt for his wife and I felt for his kids. I felt for every loser who was getting the short end of the stick, and far too many of them had

IN A SHAMELESS ATTEMPT TO WIN THE HEART OF A CHARLESTON GIRL...

straggled across my path since '29. I didn't know what made the Steinmetzes fear Dee and me, but I was sure their cause was more than just. When you've been hammered into the ground by foe and friend alike, and twisted through the wringer so many times you got nothing left to give, trust ceases to be an option. And though Agger Hensel was no better off than most in Edison Heights, I saw him in the same light I saw Amsol Shoes and Harbinger Bank. *Jacks all.*

"My, my, my, Joe," quavered a voice behind me, "what are we going to do?"

I do not know where the tire iron came from. I do not know if Dee slapped it into my hand or I scooped it up myself. To this day, I cannot even recall the footsteps I took to get there. But I do remember saying, "Excuse me, Mrs. Steinmetz," as I gently peeled her from the gorilla's back and urged her behind me. And I remember the anger, the shame, and the sorrow she showed as she moved to cover herself, the front of her dress ripped through to hemline. And then, eyes shut tight, I turned and swung with all my might, euphoria rising with the dull blow against his neck, euphoria soaring with the follow-through crack of the iron as it blew apart his skull. I swung again, harder still. And again. So hard the tire iron shot from my hands and sailed clear across the yard. Later, I would hear how it took out an upright and damaged the latticework on the McClarys' gazebo.

Agger lurched to his feet and jerked about, a mess of ties and twitches and death-throe hisses, arms flailing for me, claws simultaneously wrenching into fists and fists exploding back into open palms. It was as if I were watching a feature at the Orpheum and the projector was breaking down, stopping and starting, stopping and starting. I stepped back and waited, foolishly unafraid of the wrath about to befall me, thinking only that Hensel and his bashed-in face would be a worthy role for Karloff or Lugosi.

Aside from Agger, nobody moved, and in that eternity I saw my life spiral into a bottomless chasm, for I had surely killed him. He dropped to his knees, gurgled up a flood of slivered bone and unhydrous fluids, and careened into the sidewalk, face smashing like a sack of farm-fresh eggs flung against a wall.

Dee kneeled beside the carcass, fingers upon his neck. She looked up at me and shook her head, her face white with worry.

"Gracie," Mrs. Steinmetz called, and the little girl skipped down the steps and leaped into her mother's arms. The boy followed, limped off the porch, and helped his father to his feet.

"You want me to call the cops, Joe?" Cal McClary called from his yard.

"No," I said. "I'll do it myself. Beauchamp knows me."

"He had it coming to him, Joe. It's a clear-cut case of self-defense. Not a soul on the block won't vouch for you, Joe."

"Yeah, Cal," I said, knowing full well that when push came to shove, the only soul on the block would be me. Dee buried her face in my shoulder and commenced to weep. "I'll be okay," I reassured her, my euphoria now nausea. Heck, I will never know why I did not puke my guts right then and there.

Nursing his wounds, nose flat and bloody, right arm bent across his belly and supported by his left, Gabriel Steinmetz hobbled over to the body. "Somebody told him I'm a machinist up at Amsol," he said, sucking air like a leaky pump, every word an effort. "Came looking for my tools. But I don't have any tools. So he set his sights on—on—" He looked to his wife. "If you wouldn't have come when you did, he likely would have killed us and worse."

"Yeah," I said, more than willing to believe.

"What you did is no crime any man should pay for, Mr. Gerritson." Again, he looked to his wife. "No crime any man should pay for, is it, Audrey?"

"No, No, it's not," Mrs. Steinmetz agreed, an unspoken consent passing between herself and her husband. She whispered into her daughter's ear and gently set the girl down. Hand in hand, the two approached Agger Hensel.

"Now, Mommy?" the girl asked.

Mrs. Steinmetz nodded. "Yes, Gracie, now. Ezekiel 37, verses 5 and 6. *Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones*"

With no trace of fear, no apparent comprehension of the monstrosity that lay before her, Gracie squatted at Hensel's side, rested two fingers upon his mouth and a tiny hand upon his silent heart, and as her mother recited each line, the girl echoed in kind. *"Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones ... Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord."*

The spasms began in Hensel's toes, ripples of energy surging up his legs and converging at the base of his spine. Gracie crouched unperturbed, giggles crackling through the corners of her mouth and a throaty gulp that sounded very much like hiccups. Mr. and Mrs. Steinmetz stood together, the boy between them, the three transfixed on Hensel. Dee squeezed my hand.

"Ezekiel 37, verse 9," Mrs. Steinmetz said, breathless, unblinking, her lips moving less perhaps than even Edgar Bergen's. *"Then he said unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man ..."*

"... and say to the wind," Gracie recited, *"Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."*

"Ezekiel 37 verse 10," Mrs. Steinmetz continued, an exhausted quarterback calling audibles at scrimmage. *"So I prophesied as he commanded me"*

Again, Gracie repeated her mother's words. *"... and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great army."*

Once, in a shameless attempt to win the heart of a Charleston girl I thought I loved, I went along with her and her family to a Revival. It was held in a tent in an open field in the midst of marshland. If ever there was a day you could have drowned just by breathing, this most certainly was it. Humidity ran so thick, my teeth sweated. Worse yet, all that human salt in the air must have whipped up the appetites of the local mosquito population, because they were out in force, feeding with a frenzy on me and the Holy Rollers I had fallen in with. As for miracles that evening, I witnessed but one: the fact that this two-bit preacher could draw so many guileless souls on a night that reeked of pure hell. Heck, as inspired as this ranter and raver might have been, he wasn't even able to summon enough of the Lord to stem the mosquitoes and ease the itching and the scratching. "Do you come to these often?" I had asked the girl. And she replied, "As often as we can." From that point on, my belief in the Unseen took a decidedly downward turn, a descent that knew no bounds until the moment Agger Hensel rose from the dead.

Dee and I braced ourselves for the battle to begin anew, but the Steinmetzes revealed no such apprehension. They knew that death had drained all fight from him.

Hensel towered over us, silent and uncomprehending, as if having awakened from a deep sleep only to find himself in a time and place far removed from any reality he had ever known. He showed

no interest in us, but only in his self, examining and re-examining his feet, his knees, his belly, his hands and, finally, his face. Like a blind man reading the emotions of a dear one, his fingers traced the opposing sides from ear to ear, measuring, comparing, assessing, the battered versus the familiar. The damage I had wrought upon him was catastrophic and an unwelcome remorse welled deep within my being. He would never be the same and neither would I.

With his one remaining eye—the other burst to sinew, nerves, and pus, and lost within a swollen mass of burgeoning black and blue, Agger looked to Dee and then to me, and I imagined Ulysses confronting the Cyclops. I swallowed long and hard to keep my revulsion in check and, much to my amazement, he let me off the hook. He started up the path, plodded by the Steinmetzes, then stumbled to an awkward halt. He turned, and slowly lowered his gaze in line with Gracie. His mouth contorted oddly, twisting through shapes no words could possibly accommodate, plainly struggling to get it working right. Gracie reached out and placed a single finger upon a split and weeping knuckle, and the faintest whisper emerged from Agger Hensel's mouth, a whisper louder than any cry I have ever heard. "I am sorry," he said.

Several moments passed before any of us realized he had gone on his way.

GRACIE'S PALMS WERE BLEEDING BY THE TIME WE returned to our house. Mrs. Steinmetz moved to fetch the oven mitts, but Dee volunteered our first aid kit and she accepted gratefully. "I've never seen anything like this," Dee said. "I think she's going to need stitches, poor dear. We can call Doc Welland in the morning. He's young but—"

"No, she'll be fine," Mrs. Steinmetz assured. "They go away in time. Really, it happens all the time." It was hard to believe that this lovely, soft-spoken, and very tired woman was the same who had assaulted us on that moving-in day.

Dee got Mrs. Steinmetz—or Audrey as she now asked us to call her—a clean dress from her closet. The boy and Mr. Steinmetz washed up and I tended to their wounds as best I could, liberally splashing on the Mercurochrome and iodine. The first aid kit only held so much and most of the gauze went to Gracie.

Dee put on some coffee, poured milk for the kids, and doled out the remainder of the chocolate cake. I took the slice I'd cut for myself prior to the ruckus. I dragged in a couple of extra chairs from the dining room and the six of us sat round the kitchen table. We chatted for a bit about nothing, the way people do when there's a lot to be said and nobody knows how to begin saying it. When the small talk dried up, I jumped in with both feet.

"Stigmata," I said, staring at Gracie's bandages.

"What?" Dee said, squinting at me as if I'd stepped off the deep end.

"Stigmata," I said again, cornering Mrs. Steinmetz with the statement. "That's what they are, aren't they?" As I held her eyes, I glimpsed both fear and resignation—and, I hoped, trust. She turned to her husband. He moaned, dropped his hands into his lap, and slouched tacit agreement.

"Yes," Mrs. Steinmetz said. "Stigmata."

Dee's spoon clattered into her saucer. "What are you talking about?" she snapped. "Stigmata?"

"The wounds of a crucified Christ," I explained, underestimating

her as I did far too often. "Certain extremely devout people sometimes bleed—"

"For Heaven's sake, Joe, I know what stigmata are." Of course, she did. Dee knew a lot of good words, which was one of the reasons we were living so well in these rotten times. She worked with me on the creation of *Alphabunter*, both the game and the newspaper feature, and though it never became a staple like *Monopoly* or the crosswords, owning the patent sure helped pay our bills for a lot of years.

She ignored my apology and came right back at me. "I just don't understand what you're getting at. Are you saying that Gracie's sores?—Oh, my God, Joe!"

Gracie yawned and crawled from her chair into her mother's arms. Mr. Steinmetz, who had been about as animated as a door knocker, seemed to take Gracie's action as a cue. With great finality and flourish, he downed the last of his coffee, lay palms upon the table, and pushed himself to his feet. "I think the boy and I had better be going," he declared. "It's been a long night and we got things to get done."

"Things to get done? At this hour?" Neither Dee nor I could guess what he had in mind, but we bid him goodnight and he exited with his son in tow.

Audrey shrugged, smiled wanly. "Gabe has been living this story for so long, I don't think he could bear to hear it all over again. It's nothing against you folks, you understand? If not for you, who knows what would have become of us tonight?"

Dee refilled the woman's cup and I could have sworn I saw an angel rising amidst the steam.

"You see, Mr. Gerritsen, Mrs. Gerritsen," she began, stroking her daughter's hair, "where we come from, Gracie is what you call a 'pliable' child."

"The best kind," I beamed, but she quickly dispelled my notion.

"No, Mr. Gerritsen. The worst kind."

The little girl yawned once more, grinned wearily at Dee and me, blinked, and slipped into what must have been a warm and creamy sleep.

"By 'pliable,' I mean that Gracie is the kind of child who will be whatever anyone wants her to be. When she was born, we wanted her to be the best baby there ever was. And she was. She really was. You wanted her to be the friendly little girl next door, and she was that, too."

"Yes, she was," Dee nodded, patting the girl's hand. "Even when you were keeping her from us, she'd still be friendly, waving at me and smiling."

"I know, I saw. And if that was all anybody ever wanted of her, that would be just fine. But it's never that easy. You see, a lot of people want a lot more from her—more than Gabe or I can give. More than we've a right to let Gracie give."

"Like what she did tonight with Agger Hensel?" I said.

She shook her head with great solemnity. "Uh-huh. Like what she did tonight. But she didn't do that for him, Mr. Gerritsen, she did that for you."

"I know," I said, and swallowed hard, Agger's mashed-up mug rearing through my conscience.

Suddenly, a bitterness slunk across Audrey's face—a bitterness I could almost taste, and I cringed at the intensity. "Scum like that don't deserve to be raised," she spat. "And once they are, they don't deserve to stay so. What he tried to do to my family ... to me" Her eyes were glazing over and, just like that first day, this pretty woman was giving me the creeps.

Dee swirled a spoon through the coffee grounds at the bottom of

I WENT ALONG WITH HER AND
HER FAMILY TO A REVIVAL.

WHAT HAVE I BEEN PRAYING FOR?

her cup, and I could see she wanted desperately to defuse the moment, get the story back on track. "Gracie's quite the child," she said, at last. "I never knew someone so young could be a healer."

Audrey shuddered, pulled back from the brink, collected her thoughts, and replied with clear eyes, "Oh no, Mrs. Gerritsen, Gracie's much more than that" The words started flying then, as if she'd caught her second wind.

She told us of Gracie's birth in a small Vermont town in the middle of a wily August, "on a night when the stars were falling," (The Perseids, Dee and I figured later.) Their neighbors called it an omen—a sign of good times to come. And, before too long, the good times did come. Cows seemed to give more milk. Apple trees seemed to blossom bigger. And Gabriel Steinmetz latched on to a decent-paying teaching job up in Montpelier. There was no way to attribute all this good luck to Gracie, of course, but many people did. And with each passing day, more and more joined them. "They'd come by the house just to glimpse her—people we hardly knew, and some we didn't know at all. And when we'd take her out on walks, they'd gather round just to watch. Then they'd ask to touch her. And soon they stopped asking; they just did as they pleased. Finally, we couldn't take her out at all. Not even to church. It was like our little girl was the Dionne Quints or something. Then word got out that Gabriel had Jewish blood in him. That's when they started saying Gracie was like Jesus."

"All this because the apple trees bloomed and your husband got a job? I find that a little hard to—"

"No, Mr. Gerritsen, because of the miracles. I told you, Gracie is a pliable child. Because they wanted her to be Jesus, that's what she became."

"Miracles like Agger Hensel?"

"Raising-the-dead miracles and healing miracles and multiplying-food miracles and making-people-feel-just-plain-good miracles. And then she started bleeding. First from her feet, then from her feet and hands, and sometimes from her side. Then just from her hands mostly. The bigger the miracle, the more blood there'd be."

"Poor thing." Dee's eyes were filled with tears. "Poor little thing."

"It was becoming way too much for her. She'd be so weak sometimes, we were sure we were going to lose her. We tried moving away, but they followed us. And word kept spreading about her. They came from New York and New Hampshire and Canada. Everybody praying for Gracie to do this or that for them. We'd run, and they'd track us down—and the more demanding they became. Then they started talking about taking her from us. Just like the Dionne Quints. They said Gracie belonged to everyone, and we owed it to them. My God, Mrs. Gerritsen, if we did that, they'd bleed her bone dry. Now, after what happened tonight, we fear someone around here will talk and they'll come after us again. I just don't know what would happen then."

"Well, you don't have to worry about us saying a word to anyone, that's for sure," proclaimed Dee, and I nodded in vigorous agreement.

"It's not you I'm concerned about. The others"

"If it's Cal McLary you're worried about, I can have a chat with him come morning," I volunteered. "Cal is a reasonable fellow. And as for Agger Hensel, well, I don't think he's what you call a credible witness."

"Maybe you're right," she said.

But I could see she was far from convinced and I wasn't quite ready to let her get away. "If Dee and I were in your boat, I think we'd try looking at this thing in a whole different light."

"Yes, we would," said Dee.

"You can't keep running forever, Audrey. And your daughter has

so much to give. There's got to be some compromise or something. I saw what she did to Hensel. What if she really is the Messiah? There's so much she could accomplish"

"She's not any messiah, Mr. Gerritsen. All she is is a pliable child. You don't seem to quite understand what that means."

"I guess maybe I don't."

"You see, Mr. Gerritsen, if folks want her to be Satan, that's what she'll be, too."

SUN-UP CAME. GRACIE HUGGED AND KISSED BOTH DEE and me—and there was definitely something special in that little girl's touch, something that made us feel extra good about ourselves. She and her mother returned to their home and Dee and I got some shut-eye. Dee slept herself to sleep with a pitiful, "My, my, my ... we got to do something for them, Joe. We got to"

Around eight or so, I woke up to relieve my bladder (too much coffee), looked out the bathroom window, and saw a ladder up against the side of the Steinmetzes' house. It was one of those bungalows with an extra half-story tacked onto the rear, and I knew that was where Gracie slept. The image of that ladder immediately made me think of the Lindbergh baby and my heart started pounding. I pulled on my trousers, didn't bother with the shirt, and raced out into the yard, almost bowling over Cal McLary who was coming up my walk. "Are they in there with you, Joe? I called *The Clarion* and there's a whole bunch of people real eager to see them. That kid is something special, Joe. You gotta hear the stories."

There were more cars on our street that morning than had ever been on our street at one time before. More people, too. Just milling about in clumps of threes and fours and fives, gazing slack-jawed at the Steinmetz place like it was the Taj Mahal—some shrine or something. At the side of the house, snooping about from atop the ladder, was a man with a huge, flash camera.

"No, Cal, they're not with us. Looks to me like they've packed up and gone. I don't see their pickup anywhere. I really wish, though, you would have talked to me before you mouthed off about them, Cal."

"And share the five bucks *The Clarion* pays for scoops with you? Not likely, Gerritsen."

As the morning wore on, the bigger the crowds grew. I talked to some of the people. Dee did, too. They'd come from all over the place. New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Quebec, and a whole lot from Vermont. The only other time I'd seen people like these was at that Revival I went to with the girl from Charleston. Some knew the Steinmetzes firsthand, some only by word of mouth. Almost all were from rural communities, hardly any from cities. All had stories, too. Hearsay, mostly. About how Gracie created a bottomless picnic basket at a church social. About how Gracie cured a maiden aunt of rheumatism. About how just touching Gracie had opened a husband's eyes to the value of fidelity. All good stories, except for one, depending on your perspective, of course: a cranky gent with a raccoon-tail eyebrow and a mouthful of purple gums praised Gracie for answering his prayers by seeing that the banker fellow who stole his farm choked to death over a Sunday dinner.

On any other day, this excitement would surely have made from page of *The Clarion* and then some. But local news of another nature was breaking, even as we stood there. Our first clue was when the reporter—the fellow who had been atop the ladder—rushed off without snapping a single picture or interviewing any of us onlookers. As usual, Cal McLary was among the first to find out

Continued in page 89

Between heaven & hell...
between redemption & revenge...
lies a world where desire and death become one.

It isn't far...as *the crow flies.*



THE CROW

shattered lives &
broken dreams

EDITED BY J. O'BARR AND ED KRAMER

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spellbinding,
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The old ways die
hard—in some places
very hard indeed.

WOTAN'S PASS

TODAY, AT FATHER RAGNI'S INSISTENCE,
I killed a raven.

The priest has come north from the city to baptize the yet-unborn child of the girl Vanadis. We in the village of Sessrymnir lack a priest of our own, and so a baptism is a rare and exciting event that will draw folk from throughout the high ranges. In the past Father Grigori was summoned to perform such ceremonies, but he was old and died last autumn. Father Ragni, scarcely younger than Grigori, was appointed to lead his parish. I am told by acquaintances in the city that Ragni came to the priesthood only late in life, that he spent his earlier years as a monk in an isolated abbey on one of the western islands. His inexperience excuses many flaws; still, I cannot say I like the man.

My name is Fjalar, and I am a merchant by trade. Because of my skill with the bow, it is also my task, when need arises, to guide priests through the wilderness, as thieves and cutthroats prowl these roads. An unarmed holy man would be unwise to travel them alone; criminals care nothing for the new

BY DAVE HOING
Illustration by Web Bryant

...the raven attacked us. Time and again extended, only to veer away at the last

truth or the envoys of God who bear witness to it.

The day was cold and wet, as spring always is. In the meadow south of the forest, where the ground slopes sharply upward toward the mountains, the raven attacked us. These birds are common enough, but they are carrion eaters, and I have never known one to assault living humans. Time and again the creature dove at us with talons extended, only to veer away at the last instant. Clearly its intent, if beasts can be said to have intent, was to frighten, not to harm. Such behavior, though odd, was more nuisance than threat. Since we would soon be shielded by the forest, I would have chosen to ignore it; Father Ragni, however, insisted I kill the thing. Unable to dissuade him, I notched an arrow and took aim. A bird in flight is a difficult target for even the best bowman, and my first arrow missed; but my second pierced its breast. The raven shrieked once and plummeted onto the muddy road ahead of us.

Ragni approached the corpse, then reined his horse to a stop and dismounted. "This is a raven, is it not?"

"Yes, Father."

"I have heard," he said, poking its dead body with his staff, "that the heathens in these parts revere ravens and still use them in their unspeakable rituals." Before I could respond he withdrew a small vial from his cloak and knelt to the ground. Mumbling a prayer, he crossed himself and removed my arrow from the bird's breast. Into the oozing wound he sprinkled three drops of holy water. When nothing happened his face clouded with disappointment: I believe he expected the beast to burst into flame! Slowly he stood and replaced the vial in his cloak. "Well, then," he said, "no heathen will blaspheme the Lord with *this* one again."

I did not tell him that animals were seldom used in pagan rituals.

Ragni climbed back onto his horse and trotted ahead, forcing me to run to catch up. Our road rose north and west into the forest alongside the Fenris River, which flows out of the mountains to the sea. This time of year, with spring rains and melting snow, its current is very swift. Thunder promised more rain; a chilly breeze sifted out of the trees. As I finally overtook Ragni I tapped the horse's nose to slow it. "Father," I panted, "you should not separate yourself from me. If a thief were lying in wait, you would be dead before I could reach you."

The priest dismissed my concern with a gesture. "God is the only protection I need."

It was not God who killed the raven, but I said nothing, for he would only think me insolent and question my faith. Instead I took my position in front of the horse, recalling that the last time I had made this journey Father Grigori had borrowed a mule from church stables and left the horse to me. "If a mule was worthy to bear our Lord into Jerusalem," he'd said, "then a mule is certainly sufficient to carry me to Sessrymnir."

Ragni had a different view. The mules, he declared, were Church property and could be used more profitably in the city. One horse, mine, would have to do. It was not proper that a priest should walk, of course, nor share his mount.

Rain burst from the clouds just as we entered the forest. Ragni tightened the sheepskin at his throat, pulled the cowl over his head so that only his hooked nose protruded from the garment. The thick canopy of newly budding trees provided some protection against the rain, but the gloom there chilled us and worsened our irritable moods.

I produced one of the torches I keep in my quiver and with a flint lit a fire for us to see by.

"This is hateful country," Ragni moaned, swatting at an imaginary insect in his beard. He shivered; apparently the crucifix at the top of his staff warmed his soul but not his body.

"The inn is not far," I consoled, "and Vanadis is in her ninth month. You'll not have to wait long for the baptism."

At that he only grunted, and for the next hour we plodded on in silence. The Sun, already obscured by clouds, sank behind the mountain, bringing a dreary twilight, a deeper cold. I envied my horse her hard shoes, her strong muscles. Every step seemed to suck at my leather boots, as the road was pocked with mudholes. I was becoming exhausted. Ragni's only reaction to my discomfort was impatience, as if annoyed I was slowing him down.

There is a clearing in the forest just below the level of the village. Two roads cross here, the one we were traveling and a second that passes over the Fenris River by way of an old wooden bridge and continues east to Alfheim. To the west it descends onto the plain and merges with the caravan routes that lead to the sea. As a merchant I have taken that road many times.

Ragni and I emerged from the woods to a drenching downpour. As the priest tried to disappear into his cloak, I noticed a man leading his horse across the bridge. I recognized him as my friend Urdre. Urdre is our village ironsmith. We have been companions since childhood. When I hailed him he stopped to wait.

"Ah, Fjalar," he called, "you've returned, and not a moment too soon. Good to see you again, Father Grigori."

"Grigori is dead," snarled Ragni, throwing back his cowl. I am certain I heard him mutter under his breath, "The old fool."

"Forgive me," Urdre said, "in the darkness I didn't see...." Great gusts of steam billowed from the nostrils of his horse. The animal needed rest, but Urdre did not dismount. I introduced him to the priest.

"I am sorry to hear of Grigori, but you are welcome here. We always look forward to the visits of holy—"

"Any news of the child?" Ragni interrupted.

"Not as of two days ago. Vanadis is having a difficult time of it. The midwife, Anna, fears she will have to be cut. I have been to Alfheim informing those folks of the event and inviting them to join us in celebrating Eucharist with you. We seldom see priests up this way, so we have to take advantage of the situation as we may."

Ragni frowned at me. "I was told nothing of communion! I suppose I shall have to hear confessions as well?"

"We have as much need of God's blessings as city people," I said. "Father Grigori knew that—"

"Grigori is dead," Ragni repeated. "But we shall see."

He spoke as if sharing the sacraments with us would be an inconvenience. Many times in my life I have contemplated taking up the vows; until now I had thought myself unworthy.

"Will you ride with us, Urdre?" I asked.

"I wish I could," he said, shaking his head, "but I'm on my way to Lidskalf."

"What," Ragni said, "is Lidskalf?"

Urdre pointed to an invisible formation in the mountains. "We also call it Wotan's Pass."

The priest squinted into the twilight. "I don't see anything. A heathen god?"

"It's a passageway through the mountains. A name, nothing more. No one in our village has worshipped Wotan since my grandfather's time." Urdre glanced sideways at me and wryly lifted an eyebrow.

"What business do you have there?" Ragni demanded.

"There's someone I must summon—"

I gasped before he could finish. "The woodcutter?"

"Yes. Vanadis requested he be present for the baptism. What man has greater need of the Word than he?"

"Who is this person?" Ragni glared at us suspiciously.

I paused to gather my courage, then answered, "He is a crafts-

the creature dove at us with talons instant. I notched an arrow and took aim.

man on Lidskjalf with whom we have occasion to trade. His carvings are quite magnificent, but... he has not accepted the teachings of our Savior."

Here the priest surprised me. "A pagan?" he said, his voice calm and mild. "Does he have a name?"

"None that he has given us. He is simply the woodcutter."

"Will he come?"

"Yes," Urdré said, "but the question is, will he listen?"

Father Ragni nodded solemnly, his face transfixed in contemplation. He looked almost kind. "It is easy enough," he explained, "to save souls that wish to be saved. It is another thing to find one that is lost and to bring it home."

He spoke with a simple sincerity that made me question my harsh opinion of him. Perhaps I had been wrong. I promised myself that for this lack of charity, this presumption of judgment, tonight in my room I would do penance with the lash.

Ragni offered Urdré a blessing for safe passage. My friend bowed his head for the prayer, then slapped his horse on the rump and galloped out of our sphere of vision.

When the priest turned to address me I could see his moment of humility had passed. "So," he announced, "it seems as if there is real work to be done here." His tone was arrogant and full of ominous portent, but I did not challenge him. We resumed our journey.

The clearing was eerie in torchlight. Shadows rippled before us like living things. Wind and rain pummeled us with such force that I had to shield my torch to keep it burning. As the weather worsened, the angle of the road became steeper. And yet, despite our misery, the song of the river lulled us, compelled us toward sleep as it splashed against earthen dikes on its frenzied rush to the sea. I felt myself growing drowsy, and I nearly stumbled. "The spring floods will be coming soon," I said, "but as long as the dams upstream slow the flow, the villages should be safe."

Ragni jerked his head up as if roused from a pleasant dream. "What is that?" he said.

"Nothing, Father, I was just talking to stay awake—"

"No, that." He pointed a bony finger at an ancient rise of stones nestled against the trees at the edge of the clearing.

I began hesitantly, unsure how he would react. "It is only a barrow, Father. A graveyard."

He looked at me and pursed his lips. "Ah." Then, when we were near enough to see the mounds plainly, he scratched his head in mock confusion. "Why, I don't see any crucifixes. Odd omission in a graveyard, isn't it?"

"Crucifixes would not be appropriate for these dead," I said.

"No, I don't suppose they would." A long flat stone had captured his attention. "This is an altar, a site of pagan worship."

His words implied accusation. "Yes," I blurted, "human sacrifices were performed here, but we had nothing to do with them! This place hasn't been used for two generations. We are Christians, God damn you!"

He ignored my blasphemy but added smugly, "And yet it stands."

"Yes," I said. "We never thought to tear it down."

"Interesting."

His contradictory attitude infuriated me. He spoke of my people, who we have abandoned the old gods, with scorn and sarcasm, yet viewed the woodcutter with almost paternal fondness.

Perhaps I expected more than normal human behavior from a priest; perhaps I expected saintliness. (And perhaps it was my own expectations that failed me, not Father Ragni. If I had answered God's call, would I have fared better? Certainly my temper was nothing to be proud of. Had I not just taken the Lord's name in

vain?) Ashamed, I coaxed the horse onward.

White curls of smoke lifted above the last line of trees before Sessrynnir. Ragni made no further comment as we passed the barrow, though as I led him out of the woods and to the inn he whispered, "Do not imagine, Fjalar, that I will forget that heathen place."

A stableboy came to care for the horse as soon as he dismounted.

Freda, proprietor of the inn since her husband's death, greeted us at the door. A woman of 50 years, she was too wise to show surprise at the new priest. She simply brushed a gray tuft of hair from her forehead and said, "So. Grigori is dead, God rest his soul. And bless yours, Father?"

"Ragni."

"I'm Freda. Come in. You, too, Fjalar. Warm yourselves by the fire."

I doused my torch in the bucket next to the door and stepped inside with Father Ragni. The rich aroma of mutton porridge wafted out from the greathall, reminding me of my empty stomach. Freda hung our cloaks on wooden pegs, apologizing for the rain and cold.

Ragni leaned on his staff. "Mistress, weather is God's work. It needs no apology. Even if it is miserable."

"Of course. Fjalar, show the Father to the hearth. I'll bring food." With that she scuttled away, leaving Ragni still in my charge. I'd looked after him for a week and had hoped now to give up that responsibility.

A loud clap of thunder shook the walls of the inn.

"Where is the girl?" Ragni said as we walked toward the great hall.

"Vanadis is upstairs in her confinement. Freda is her mother."

"And the father?"

I sat at an unoccupied bench and blew on my frozen fingers. "Her father is dead."

"Not the girl's father, idiot," he said, joining me, "the child's."

I hesitated, and then was spared from answering by a scream from above. Fearing the worst, many guests rushed for the stairs. I went with them but Ragni did not. Vanadis, a girl of 13, lay crumpled on the landing at the top, her bloated belly heaving. She was sweating and trembling and on the verge of delirium. Freda reached her first, bounding up the steps with an energy that belied her age.

Vanadis's greasy hair was matted to her face. "The baby kicked," she panted. She struggled to focus her eyes. "It hurt so much! There were voices... but I was alone. It was dark. I was so frightened and wanted to come down..."

Freda's head immediately snapped around to survey the inn, and we all looked as well. A few guests had remained below.

"Aha!" Freda cried. Anna, the midwife brought in to attend to Vanadis, cowered behind two men near the hearth, peering up at the proprietor with dread. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve and shoved her tankard of ale toward one of the men.

"Woman," Freda raged, "you are not paid to drink and flirt! If Vanadis had fallen we might have lost both her and her child!"

"Sorry, mistress," Anna murmured as she hurried up the steps.

"Just thought I'd have a little nip. I was thirsty."

"Whatever you need will be delivered to you."

"Yes, mistress." Head down, the woman slinked into Vanadis's room.

Freda pointed at me and another man I didn't recognize. "Fjalar, you two help Vanadis to her bed."

"Wait." Ragni stood at the bottom of the stairs. We all held our breath as he slowly ascended, majestic as a gathering storm. The only sound was the fabric of his robe as it swished against wood. Reaching the top he glared at Vanadis venomously. "So this is the girl. Rather young for childbirth, is she not?"

"She is of the proper age," Freda said.

"It hurts," Vanadis sobbed.

The priest watched her writhe in her agony. He displayed no sympathy for her pain; rather, he seemed to find her ordeal distasteful. His face became so pale I thought he was going to be sick. "She smells," he said, loosening the material at his throat. "Birthing is a messy business." Then he waved his hand, an imperious gesture giving us permission to move her.

Vanadis was asleep almost the instant we lay her on the bed. As I gazed at her innocent beauty, I regretted never having taken a wife. But I am a merchant and a guide for priests; as often as I must be away, what woman would have me? Still, it is a lack I often feel. (I have also aspired to the priesthood. Just last year the Pope reiterated the Church's stance against its clergy marrying, making my options very clear: the holy vows or a wife. These are my life's two desires, and I have chosen instead to exist in the empty spaces between them.)

Out in the hallway I heard Freda thank her guests for their concern and bid them return to their meals.

"Who is the father?" Ragni said when the rest had gone. His voice was low and threatening.

Anna and I exchanged worried glances. The man who'd helped me with Vanadis started to speak, but I silenced him with a finger to my lips. Hearing no response from Freda, I crept to the door and peered out. From that angle I could not see Ragni, only Freda standing against the railing, looking calmly toward the stairs. She sighed.

"Well?" the priest snapped. "Are you going to answer me?"

Still Freda paused, as if giving the matter great thought. Then she drew a dramatic breath and said simply, "No."

With that she disappeared from my view. The man and I left Anna with Vanadis and followed Freda downstairs. Ragni stood two steps down from the top, his body rigid, his mouth agape with sanctimonious wrath. I took a sinful delight in his failure. Perhaps he could intimidate me with his authority, but Freda was made of sterner stuff. He would find her a formidable enemy.

It was not until much later that he joined the rest of the guests at the long table near the hearth. We'd already finished our porridge. Freda had set a wooden bowl for him, but would not serve him. Ragni scooped his bowl into the pot, then snuffed the contents as if suspicious of poison. Satisfied it was safe, he hungrily drank the warm brew.

When he finished he let out a loud belch. "Tell us a tale," someone suggested. "Tell us of Father Grigori."

"There is little to say of him," Ragni muttered. "Against the advice of our bishop he went to a house to bless a girl who'd fallen gravely ill, hoping to cure her. But this disease of hers, this disease which has descended upon my city, claims all who are exposed to it."

"The girl died?"

"Oh, yes. And Grigori, too."

"That is a wonderful story! He gave his life in the service of Christ!"

Ragni exhaled through clenched teeth. "Father Grigori died a doddering fool. The sick girl was a good Christian. The last rites had been performed. Her soul was already saved, so there was no need to save the body. All he accomplished was his own death, a death that silenced a very eloquent voice. That was his gift, the ability to inspire others to faith. In speaking the Word, Grigori was unmatched. And now, because he insisted on offering help where none was required, that gift is lost. There are souls in this world that he alone could reach. What awaits them now but the flames of hell?"

I noticed a bitterness in his tone. "But surely, Father," I said, "no one may know the time of his own death. How can you condemn

Grigori for acting on his conscience? The Church should have more like him."

"His death was perilously close to suicide," Ragni said, frowning at me for effect. "You know how the Church views that."

Shocked by his assertion, we all huddled into our jerkins and avoided his gaze. It was still raining furiously outside, accented by thunder and lightning and wind. Even next to the hearth we felt the chill of the weather. Deeper yet was the chill within us, for at that moment I believe each of us considered this man, this priest, to be a fraud. His indignation was simply a pretense to disguise his brooding jealousy for Father Grigori—a terrible, ugly trait in a man to whom we appeal for guidance.

Realizing he had angered us, Ragni announced he would tell another tale, one that would both amuse and instruct. He then launched into a preposterous account of pagan rituals and human sacrifices. Certainly he'd never witnessed these things himself, and I doubted he had ever encountered a real pagan in his life. His youth and middle years were spent as a monk in an isolated abbey. Perhaps he filled those days transcribing lurid fairy tales or listening to exaggerations concocted by other monks as ignorant as himself. In any case, his story was so fantastic, so ridiculously untrue, that we could not help but laugh. I could tell by his expression that we had hurt his feelings, but to whom did he think he was speaking? We here in Sessrymur are within a day's walk of the heathens who still live up beyond Lidskjalf. We know.

Ragni turned his face from us, staring morosely into the fire. Even if he was a fraud, he was also a man; as such he was subject to human weaknesses and deserving of Christian charity. Thinking to cheer him, I rose and removed a small but ornate wooden statue from the shelf next to the hearth. "Father," I said, "remember the woodcutter Urdré was going to see? This is one of his creations. Is it not beautiful? He gave it to Vanadis when he heard she was with child."

Ragni took the statue from me and studied it for long moments without comment. Crafted out of a rich, dark wood, the statue depicted a bird raging at a diminutive sheep caught in its talons. The wood was smooth as polished stone, its grain used to suggest feathers. Light from the fire transformed its deep brown color to red.

The priest sighed and handed it back to me. "It is beautiful," he murmured, "but beauty is a thing of this world, not to be coveted. Our lives should be simple, devoted to the next life, not this one."

I nodded and started to return the statue to the shelf.

"Fjalar," he said. I stopped. "Pagans are wonderful artists, aren't they?" It was not a question. His voice was so melancholy, so full of despair, that I wanted to embrace him, soothe him, forgive him.

But I did not. Instead I retired to my room to write these words, and to do penance with the lash.



HIS DAY DAWNED FAIR AND COOL. THE SUN ignited the snow on the high peaks in a blaze of orange, melting away yesterday's storm clouds and rendering the sky an effervescent blue. Toward mid-morning Ragni joined me at the northwest window. "There, Father," I said, pushing aside the waxed cloth that served for glass and pointing to the mountains, "now you can see it."

He squinted. "See what?"

"Lidskjalf. Wotan's Pass." With most priests I might hesitate to mention anything of the old religion. But with Ragni... well, he seemed most agreeable when dreaming of lost souls he could save.

Freda approached with an armload of wood for the fire. Ragni

There was a single moment more of silence, shouting and sobbing and cursing. People

eyed her maliciously and snorted, "Looks like a cave, nothing more." Then, without a word to her, he stood and walked away. I glanced at Freda, she at me.

"He's a difficult one," she said, tossing logs into the hearth.

"You'll get no argument from me," I replied.

Freda made a spitting sound. "He is certainly not Father Grigori." I nodded. "And he knows it. I think that explains much."

"Isn't envy a sin?"

"Yes, but what man would not change the dark angels of his nature if he could? Perhaps in some matters priests are as powerless as the rest of us. We should not judge him too harshly—"

At that instant Anna the midwife came rushing down the stairs and cried, "Vanadis's water has broken!"

Those guests still present began to applaud, but Freda silenced them. "Shh!" she spat, waving her hands wildly in the air. "Do you want to upset my girl with all this noise?"

We all laughed at her; it was touching to see her clucking like a chicken. Vanadis was the only one of Freda's eight children to survive into adolescence, and so this baby would be her first grandchild. After 50 years of stoicism, she could be forgiven a lapse of dignity at a time like this.

Teasing, I suggested we all go up to keep Vanadis company.

Freda shot me a withering glare. "You filthy pig, nobody but Anna is allowed in the room—especially men! Birthing is for women alone."

"Had to be a man there one time," someone said. Freda shook a warning finger at him, and again we all laughed. As she stormed away in mock anger, one of the guests clapped me on the back. "If we're not careful," he said, "we'll get no dinner!" I winced in pain, for the wells from last night's lashing were still fresh. The scouring of flesh is a small enough price to pay for the sins we commit every day.

Word of Vanadis's impending joy spread quickly through the village, bringing more and more people to the inn. The birth was not as exciting as the anticipation of a baptism. Lacking a priest of our own, we cherish the rare opportunity to participate in an official Holy Rite of the Church.

An hour passed, and then two. Freda was at her wit's end trying to silence the din of anxious voices. Finally, just after noon, Urdre returned from Lidskjalf. What Freda could not do with threats he accomplished with the simple grimness of his visage. An eerie hush fell upon us as he summoned us outside.

"I have news," he said quietly. "The woodcutter's hut has been abandoned. When I couldn't find him I decided to check the dams at the river's sources. They've been damaged, and with yesterday's rain on top of the melting snow, they cannot hold. They could go at any time. And the worst of it is this: It wasn't nature that destroyed those dams. They've been hacked with an axe or sword."

"Do you suspect the woodcutter?" I asked.

Urdre nodded. "Yes, though why he would want to drown us I don't know."

There was a single moment more of silence, then pandemonium erupted, everybody shouting and sobbing and cursing. People would be killed. Homes would be lost. Seedlings in the valleys would be washed away. It would be total ruin. Acts of God could be accepted without complaint, but this atrocity was the work of man.

Although no ill had yet befallen us, already there were demands for retribution. Shouting gave way to panic, panic to rage. The situation could have gotten out of control had not Freda thought quickly. "It's a boy!" she screamed, though of course she could not have known this. Her play worked. The people set aside their problems to concern themselves with the child.

Freda entered the inn, followed by Ragni, Urdre, and myself. Others struggled behind. We crept up the stairs to Vanadis's room. I do not think it was Freda's intention to actually allow us in, but she was now committed and needed accomplices.

Oddly, the door would not open. We called to Anna and Vanadis, but there was no response, only a low moaning from within. Urdre and I threw our shoulders against the door, shattering the top half of it. The four of us then stepped through to find Anna lying against the bottom half, jamming it shut. The midwife was obviously unconscious, or worse. Urdre rolled her aside, revealing an ugly black bruise on her right temple. It seemed impossible, but someone had viciously struck her down. Even as we examined her she gasped her final breath.

The room was pungent with the smells of recent birth. Vanadis writhed incoherently on the bed, her nightclothes drawn up past her waist. As feared, she had had to be cut for delivery. She exuded sweat and blood and the byproducts of birth.

A warm breeze floated in through the open window, and yet we all felt a chill. *There was no child.*

"*Mater Dei,*" Ragni muttered, crossing himself and fingering his rosary. He looked about the room in a daze. Urdre, a strong man, fainted. Freda became hysterical. I vomited and wept aloud over this unfathomable tragedy.

The buzz of excited voices downstairs returned me to my senses. Ripping off a piece of bedding, I stuffed the material between Vanadis's legs to stem the bleeding. Then I carried her to another room, away from the horrors of her own. Without the child inside her she was a tiny wisp of a girl, light as a feather pillow. She moaned and thrashed as I lay her down. Her eyes rounded in terror, but they were focused inwardly. After what she had witnessed she might never want to view this world again. To pacify her, unable to think of anything else, I placed her thumb in her mouth. Poor girl—she ceased her struggles and sucked noisily as a babe.

What I wondered, *had she witnessed?*

Back in Vanadis's room Ragni was trying to comfort Freda. Strange how a crisis will unite enemies. Urdre recovered from his faint and wobbled to his feet. "Fjaral, look," he said, noting what I'd already seen: the open window.

Some of the guests started filing upstairs. "How is the child?" one woman asked. "And Vanadis?" said another.

I remained staring at the window. This deed had been carefully timed. The criminal had taken advantage of our confusion to climb in, murder Anna, and steal the child. Vanadis's room was on the second floor, true, but the inn was backed against an abutment, so gaining access through the window would not have been difficult. A man could accomplish it with a short hop. A man such as the woodcutter.

There were no footprints, though. None in the room, and none on the abutment. Yesterday's rain had softened the ground. Anyone walking there would leave impressions; anyone coming in from there would drag mud.

When order was restored we organized a search party. Small groups spread out in all directions. The largest contingent was dispatched to Lidskjalf to try to bolster the dams. Already water was nearing the top of the earthen dike alongside the Fenris River.

Those traveling the greatest distance took the horses, leaving the rest of us to make our way on foot. Father Ragni insisted on accompanying us, and I, of course, was assigned to guard him. Almost immediately he and I became separated from our companions. The priest, being old, required frequent rests. The last of these occurred in the clearing of the woods I had led him through yesterday. Stop-

then pandemonium erupted, everybody would be killed. It would be total ruin...

Obsessed beyond madness now, he tossed the to wrench out its entrails.

ping at the barrow, he leaned on the altar and drew wheezing breaths. Early evening now, the Sun hovered just above the mountaintops. Much of the day's heat had been lost. Nights at this time of year are still very cold. "Your graveyard again, Fjalar?" Ragni puffed, but cut off my apology. "It's all right. Is it not invigorating to stand in a healthen place, your body an island of godliness in an ocean of evil?"

His predecessor might have used a similar image. The thought of Grigor brought to mind a question. Asking it would almost certainly provoke Ragni's ire, but curiosity overcame caution. "You speak highly of Father Grigor's gift," I ventured, "yet I sense you didn't like him. Why?"

"Oh, yes, he was gifted—and he knew it." Ragni paused in disgust, then went on when he saw my skepticism. "Perhaps you've heard I was a monk. Although it may not seem so, it is an unusual step to go from the brotherhood to the priesthood. When I made clear my wishes to him, he secretly interceded with the Bishop on my behalf."

"Forgive me, Father," I said, "but isn't that a kindness?"

"No. He considered me unfit to be a priest."

I was confused. "Then why," I said, "would he help you—?"

"To ensure his own reputation. If I am a failure as his successor, then his stature in death becomes greater than it was in life. He is exalted every time I fail."

I shook my head, though it was true I had made such comparisons myself. "I remember him as a humble and caring man."

"You remember the illusion he created of himself. Christ, how he mocked me, how he mocked us all, with his pride and vainglory!"

I had not realized until that moment the extent to which envy can unhinge a man's mind and blacken his heart against things good and decent. It was a sad spectacle to behold.

I started to protest this slander when the priest's eyes suddenly swept upward. A huge black raven soared into the sky over the clearing. Without warning it shrieked and plummeted toward us. This time there was no doubt: It did not mean to frighten, it meant to kill. One of the creature's talons ripped through Ragni's shoulder. He staggered but otherwise did not acknowledge the pain. Blood dripped down his arm, yet he glared at the beast as if daring it to attack again.

I unslung my bow and notched an arrow.

"No, Fjalar," he said. "It wants me. This is my fight." He gripped his staff with both hands, its crucifix glowing bronze in the sinking sun. The raven obliged by diving straight at him. He swung at it, but it pulled away too fast. Time and again this happened. Although he never made contact, the bird caused him no further harm.

The stalemate was broken by a rustling in the woods above and behind us. "Priest!" cried a deep male voice in the mountain dialect. The raven retreated into the sky.

Ragni and I both spun toward the sound, our weapons at the ready. A man strolled down the path, the Sun at his back, and stopped on the other side of the altar. He gazed at us with a smile, a hideous smile I had seen many times before.

"You are seeking me?" he said. He was a very tall, very old man with a long silver beard and only one eye. A massive scar blighted the left side of his face where the other had been. In one hand he held a sword; in the other, the child. This he thrust toward us.

"You are the woodcutter," Ragni said calmly.

"I am Wotan!" The woodcutter pointed to the heavens. "That raven is my creature, as was her sister whom you killed yesterday. I have the power to guide her actions." He jabbed his sword into the ground and extended his left arm. Like a trained falcon the raven lit upon it. "Did she not try to kill you?"

"Any simpleton can teach a bird to attack. Whatever power you

have has been granted to you by God."

"I am Wotan, I say, and I spit on your god!"

Wotan? A ridiculous boast, of course; I had known this man all my life. (Yet—how did he walk across a muddy abutment without leaving footprints . . .?)

"You are a murderer," Ragni said, "whatever else you claim to be."

The priest was referring to Anna, but his adversary misunderstood. "I did not kill this *thing!*" he raged. "It was dead at birth, an ugly, malformed lump fouled by the presence of your White Christ. I came only to retrieve the child I fathered, and this is what I found—"

"You are the father?" Appalled, Ragni turned to me with an accusatory glare. "You knew this?"

I bowed my head. "Yes, Father."

"Freda knew as well?"

"Yes. We in the mountains accept this as a fact of life, but we were afraid you would refuse to baptize a bastard."

"Baptize!" the woodcutter roared, startling the raven into flight. He lunged at us over the altar, but I drew back my bowstring and he stopped; he was well aware of my prowess. This close, I could bury an arrow in his good eye before he could take two steps. Does a god fear a mortal's arrow? A neglected god, perhaps, a god of the past. An impotent god.

He backed up and for a moment seemed to listen to the flow of the Fenris. Then he sighed and said, "My son is not fit to look at. I blame you, priest."

"How could I harm the child? This is the first I've seen of him."

"It is your foul, abhorrent god that did this."

"Some children are simply born with defects. God does not interfere."

"The world has lost its senses. I would kill you all if I could."

"Is that why you tried to destroy the dams?"

The woodcutter snarled. "Let the idiots drown in their own stupidity."

"They are not the first," Ragni said gently, "to see their old gods pushed out by a new One who is stronger."

"Nor will they be the last."

"I can help you."

I could not believe my ears. The woodcutter had murdered an innocent woman and stolen a child. If ever a soul cried out for damnation, his did! And Ragni wanted to help him? Was he mad?

The woodcutter cursed him. "I would die first."

"Oh, yes. Dying is part of the process. But then you could live again."

Furious, the old pagan paced behind the altar. He looked at me as if he expected me to reason with Ragni. I shook my head. At the moment I had little sympathy for either man.

When water began to spill over the dike, the woodcutter lay the child on the altar. He stripped off his tunic. Standing naked before us, he slowly, tenderly, wrapped his son in the coarse woolen fabric. Then he lifted his head and keened to Asgaard in the old tongue, as if the grief of the world were on his shoulders.

The child was obviously dead, a misshapen blob of failed humanity. And yet, and yet... I was certain I saw a tiny hand rise of its own accord from that tangle of fabric, rise and reach for the woodcutter's gnarled fingers.

Father Ragni had seen it, too. He gasped at the impossibility that confronted him. "This is an outrage!" he cried, spittle flying from his mouth. "Only the one true God may give back life!"

His words broke the spell, for the child's hand fell back into the cloth, trembled once, and did not move again. Enraged, the woodcutter snatched his sword and attacked with inconceivable swiftness. My reflexes were quicker though: I loosed an arrow that

knife down and reached inside the corpse These he dropped in a heap beside the altar...

pierced his skull and dropped him like a stone. The man who called himself a god fell dead at Ragni's feet, leaving the priest unharmed.

"Fjalar," Ragni screamed in horror, "what have you done?"

"He would have killed you!"

"I am already saved! My death would mean nothing. But he died without repenting, without accepting Christ. You have damned him."

"He is a murderer, he damned himself!" I felt tears on my cheeks. This was so unfair! I had no power to damn or to save.

Suddenly Ragni's mind gave out entirely. His eyes glowed wildly, he drooled, he babbled. He threw down his staff and stared at the corpse with contempt.

What happened next sickened me to my heart. Setting the woolen bundle with the child on the ground, Ragni hoisted the woodcutter's body onto the altar. He demanded my dagger in a voice of such desperation that I dared not refuse. I could only watch aghast as he plunged my knife into the dead man's chest, slicing down through the abdomen to the pelvis. He then made two cuts to bisect the first, all the while chanting something in Latin and weeping. The raven ripped at him, but he paid it little heed, simply shooing it away with his hand. Obsessed beyond madness now, he tossed the knife down and reached inside the corpse to wrench out its entrails. These he dropped in a heap beside the altar, where they steamed in the cooling air.

"Here, you bloody bastard," he shrieked, "here is a pagan ritual for you!" His breath billowed like smoke out of hell. He seemed to have forgotten about me, for he spoke only to the woodcutter. "I would have saved you! I would have saved your immortal soul! Grigori could inspire a stone to faith, but even he never converted a god! Now everything is lost—" The priest collapsed next to the entrails, sobbing into his fists like a child. "I am lost..."

I do not like Father Ragni, I have admitted as much. But seeing him like that, I was moved to a greater compassion than I have ever felt for any man. I did not realize that when a priest saves one soul, he saves two.

The Fenris was gushing over its dike in torrents now. If we remained here much longer we would be swept away. Still, I could not leave the body on the altar in that condition. Father Ragni would be ruined if people learned he had performed a pagan ritual. First I gathered the entrails and sloshed them to the dike. I flung the gore into the river, then returned for the woodcutter. He was old but still solid and quite heavy. Only Ragni's madness had allowed him to manage such weight. I had to drag the corpse most of the way, a difficult undertaking against a strong current and up a steep slope. Finally I lay him on top of the dike. With a last look at this craftsman of unequalled skill, this murderer and self-proclaimed god, I rolled his body over the edge. The churning water of the Fenris devoured him, sucking him into its underbelly and carrying him downstream to be spewed into the sea.

It was nearly dark by the time I had finished. I was cold and wet and exhausted. The old priest was still on his knees when I reached him, the flood well above his waist. I knelt and wrapped my arm around his heaving shoulders. Guiding him to his feet, I nudged him gently up the path to the inn, where we would be safe from the water a while longer. He wept the whole way, begging God to forgive his inadequacies. He clutched at me, raking his hands across the wounds on my back. It was only fitting; in his way he had given his sanity in the service of Christ, while I suffered only the pains of the flesh. I stroked his thinning hair and cooed little nonsense phrases of comfort. The kind of help he needed was beyond me.

After I'd settled him into bed at the inn, I returned to the dry spot above the clearing, thinking I had forgotten something. Water was by now lapping blood from the top of the altar, though to my relief

its advance seemed to be slowing now. The back end of Ragni's staff bobbed and swayed on the surface; the other end, the one with the crucifix, was submerged, anchored to the ground.

Then I remembered: Vanadis's child. What was I to make of this, a dead thing given respite, a solitary moment of life? As if in answer, the woodcutter's raven screeched a baleful challenge from high above the dike, then released a woolen bundle into the river and winged off toward Wotan's Pass.



E BURIED ANNA THIS AFTERNOON. URDRÉ knows some Latin and spoke the Mass for the Dead. He injected as much promise into the service as he could muster, but we took little solace from his words, for our problems are still many. At least Anna has been released from this world.

We no longer fear the floods, as those who climbed to Lidskjalf managed to slow the rushing waters with stones and dead wood. For that we are grateful, though there are Masses yet to be said for the two men who were drowned in the effort. The water level will remain high for some time, but assuming no more than normal rainfall, Sessrynnir should be in no danger. We have less hope for villages lower in the mountains, where the Fenris merges with other streams. Certainly crops will be lost, which means a lean year for us all.

Vanadis's wound is but a physical one, and she will recover. Cutting is common enough, especially in young women; with good care she should be healed in two weeks. How she will handle the trauma of the past day is another matter. But she has her mother to see her through it. Freda has lost seven children, and grief has made her strong.

And Father Ragni? He is quite mad. He sits in his room at the inn and rants, refusing to take in food or drink unless we force it down his throat. Twice already he has fouled his garments, and I have had to clean him up. It is clear he will never return to the city, but that does not matter. I fear he has little time left.

There have been rumors, of course, about the cause of his distress, but I will never reveal the truth.

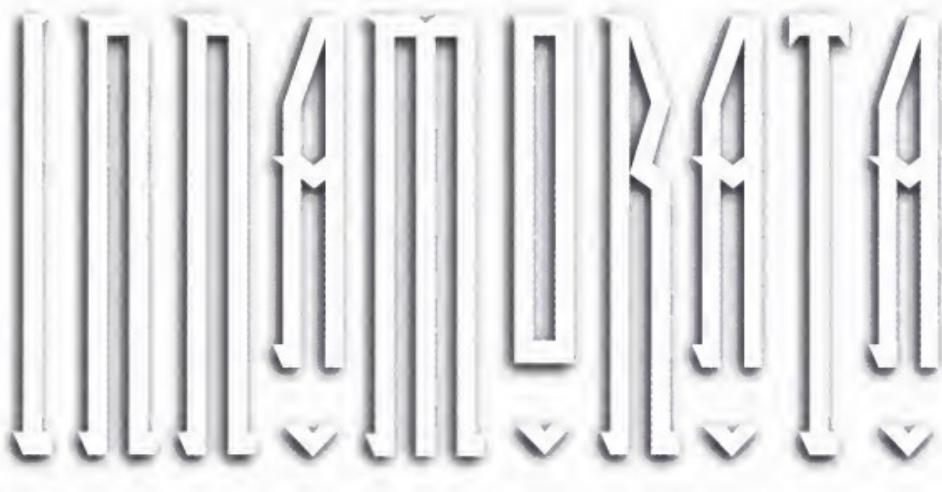
I watch him with a mixture of loathing and admiration. I cannot help but think that he has done this to himself, and yet... would I have made this sacrifice? Would I have invited this degradation upon myself in the name of my God? For surely that is what Ragni has done. He fights a perpetual and, for him, unwinnable, battle in his mind between what he is and what he wishes to be. His successes and failures are threads spun into the same cloth, and he does not know how to separate them.

The blasphemy of his monstrous ritual is not what made him mad. He could forgive himself that—the woodcutter's soul, after all, had already departed, and the scourging of flesh is no sin—but what he will not, *cannot*, forgive is his inability to exceed Father Grigori's standards, which he felt he could achieve by the old pagan's salvation. Experienced priests accept that there are souls they cannot reach, but Ragni, despite his age, is a novice. To comfort him I have acknowledged the burden of damnation he placed on me for killing his adversary. He only blinks and drools when I speak.

I, too, have been touched by madness. Was the woodcutter Wotan? I cannot believe it and retain my faith in Christ. And yet I can never again dream of entering the priesthood, for the movement of that dead child's hand has forever jaded me. It was a striking scene, a terrible, wonderful image I will carry with me to my grave.

I can hear the woodcutter laughing. True, he is saying, your White Christ did drive out the old gods. But we, in this one small way, have had our revenge.¹⁴

THE RIDE north from Cache Creek left Paul Keogh off just outside of 100 Mile House. He stood by the side of the road watching the red tail lights turn off and bounce away down a dark, rough road. It was about 2 AM, with the night sky clear and cool and the white bone moon lighting the road and Paul didn't mind walking in it. More than that. It was good to be back up-country. It was good to be out smelling the wet grass smell of the real world. It was so good Paul was



tempted to turn off the road before he reached town, climb over the caribou fence and head into the woods right here and now. He even stopped walking a minute and stood in the middle of the highway listening to the pressing silence, the impatient rustling in the dark place beyond and thought about it. But he didn't do it.

BY LISA R. COHEN
Illustration by Jon Foster



This wasn't the place—it would mean nothing here.

Instead he shouldered his pack, kept on walking toward the lights of town, found himself on the tiny main street walking past the closed, dark buildings of the Forest Service post, the QuickMart, video rentals, laundry, liquor store—heading toward the only lit-up window of the Hollywood truck stop/bus station/diner flashing 24 hours. There were, amazingly, people inside.

Paul opened the door to the sound of cowbells and the sudden warm smell of fried chicken and beer. It was kids inside, teenagers really. Long hair and leather jackets. Three guys and a girl in a booth and another guy rocking a pinball machine that dinged and clattered against the wall. They fell silent as he entered and stared at him. The girl stared at him.

"Evening," said Paul, letting the door fall shut behind him. No one answered but it didn't seem to mean much.

There was another kid, big native kid, older than the others, standing behind the counter wearing an apron over flannel shirt and jeans.

"You want something?" the counter guy asked.

"A place to spend the night if it's possible," said Paul.

"Hostel over by the Forest Service."

Paul shook his head. The counter guy looked him up and down and shrugged.

"I got a bedroll in the shed," he said. "Ten bucks, you can sleep there 'til my shift's over."

"When's that?" Paul asked. The counter guy shrugged again.

"Couple hours," he said. "Sun up anyway."

"Good enough," said Paul. "Show me?"

"Lanny'll show you," said the counter guy. "Hey, Lanny."

"What," the girl snapped, looking up. She was about 15, Paul thought. Native. One of the guys had his arm around her, a roll-y pinched in the brown stained fingers of her other hand.

"Take this guy out to the shed," said the counter guy. "Show him where he can crash."

"You show him," said the girl, and went back to ignoring him. But the big guy just stared at her for a hard minute and she rolled her eyes and got up from the booth.

THE SHED WAS A SHED

, not very big, not very warm, reeking of paint thinner. There was sharp-looking, rusty crap everywhere and right at the back a cleared-out area, half walled with boxes, where two bedrolls were laid out on a couple of big flats of cardboard. Beer cans and roll-y roaches littered the floor.

Lanny pointed to the left-hand bedroll.

"That's his."

"Thanks," said Paul. Something rose in his throat and he swallowed hard, made it go down. "Is there a can?" he asked.

"In the Hollywood," she said, then squinted at him. "Something wrong with you? You sick?"

"No," said Paul. He swallowed again. Sweat beaded up on his forehead, cold in the cold air.

"Whatever," said Lanny.

Paul followed her back into the restaurant, found the men's room. Sweet stink of disinfectant and the blue-gray buzz of fluorescents. Paul stood in front of the sink and stared at his sallow face in the mirror.

Not now, he thought. Not yet...

He swallowed again, turned the water on, and drank from his cupped hands. He held the water down for a full minute, then leaned over the sink and opened his mouth and all the water rushed out. He retched silently after it but nothing else came up.

When he came back to the counter they all looked at him. He pulled a flat wad of cash out of his pocket, handed a ten to the counter guy, who was looking at him carefully now, looking at the money, looking at him.

"Lanny says you're sick."

"No," said Paul. "I'm not sick." The counter guy shrugged.

"I don't know..." He slid the ten back across the counter. Paul stared at it for a minute, then he took it back.

"The hostel's got rooms," said the counter guy.

"Thanks," said Paul, but he had the door open already and he didn't turn around.

OUTSIDE THE DARKNESS

seemed colder now, less clear. Paul started walking again but only got a few buildings along before he had to stop, swallow ... hold it all together. He sat down on the curb, dropped his head into his hands. Faintly he heard the cowbell tinkle of the truck stop door open. A minute later scuff of shoes on the pavement behind him.

It was the girl, Lanny.

"Shouldn't you go to the hospital or something?" she asked.

Paul shook his head, no.

"Walter's an asshole," she went on, sounding angry. "It's not even his shed. You can sleep there if you want. You can use my roll." Paul smiled thanks with his lips together but shook his head, no, again. Walter was right. It was a bad idea. Just his own stupid vanity—holding off, wanting it to mean something. He should have gone into the woods from the start. The girl was watching him. He swallowed, hard—gave himself a minute's breathing room.

"Gotta go," he said thickly around the thing rising in his throat.

"Sorry." He started to rise, changed his mind.

"You gotta hurl, do it," said the girl, shrugging. "I don't care."

Paul shook his head, swallowed. His sinuses were filling now, nose starting to run, eyes tearing stickily.

"Go 'way," he said. "Don't feel bad." He made it to his feet this time but light shattered and spread across the wet surface of his eyes, blinding him. He squeezed his eyes tight. Swallowed. Too late. His face was wet, mouth filling.

The girl grabbed his arm, pulled him.

"Oh man," she was saying. "Come on ..." Paul shook her off but she grabbed him again and this time he let her pull him. Not far—somewhere dark; dark-alley smells of garbage, cat, and piss. She leaned him against a wall. Paul found her arm, shoulder—pushed hard.

The girl said "Hey!" when he hit out at her, moved away but didn't leave. He opened his blinded eyes again, felt warm wetness syrup in his cheeks, more flowing. Fuck. Too late. Mouth full. Nose full. No way to breathe. He retched, felt the rising tide shift upward from way deep down, retched again and had to let it go, slow motion fountain of clear syrupy fluid erupting from his mouth. Thick as a baby's arm, it hung from his open mouth like a rope of molten glass and didn't fall.

Hands on his knees he looked up through a lens of clear fluid and saw the girl, Lanny, eyes wide, both hands over her mouth. More of the clear thick fluid ran from his eyes, nose, down the sides of his neck from his ears, collecting around the glossy dangling rope. There was a bulge at the end of the rope like the ball on the end of a glass-blower's pipette. It swayed gently out of time with the pounding of his heart. Down the alley a coyote yipped and howled.

And stopped. The upward rush inside him halted as if at the sound, lost its gelidity, slid back.

Paul's eyes cleared abruptly, followed by nose, ears. He snuffed wetly, convulsively a couple of times. The rope shortened, thinned, became a tiny string like drool, then disappeared. He swallowed it, closed his mouth over it. Sank back against the wall.

"Jesus Mary Joseph," said the girl.

Paul swallowed again but just an ordinary swallow then tentatively looked up to meet her eyes. The girl looked angry. She had flat, clear skin with the pits of old acne scars dotting her high cheekbones; thick eyebrows pulled together in a vee.

"Sorry," Paul whispered. The girl shook her head.

"You okay now?"

Paul nodded.

"But it's gonna happen again, right?"

He nodded again.

"I got a place you can sleep," said the girl. "Not the shed. My own

place like.

"Thanks," said Paul. He straightened up on shaky legs and pushed away from the wall. "But I'm going to move on."

"Bullshit," said the girl. She didn't sound 15. "Wait here." And she was off, half running down the alley, back toward the Hollywood. Paul watched her go, then hitched his pack and started walking in the opposite direction, north toward 97. He got a couple of blocks, then he heard the low rumble of an unturned engine behind him in the alley. He turned—found himself caught in the cross-eyed beams of a pickup that was squashed in along the passenger side. The pickup pulled up beside him and the passenger door swung open. It was Lanny, leaning over from the driver's seat.

"Get in," she said. Paul looked at her, looked down the long corridor of the alley that would turn up onto the highway. There was an animal rattling around down there, dog or coyote. The road beyond was quiet. Dark.

Empty.

Paul suddenly wanted anything but to walk that lonely road alone. Stupid, but he was just too tired to shake it off. Too tired after all.

"Okay," he said and got in.

They reached the end of town in about a minute, turned off the highway heading northeast along a long, straight stretch of rough paved road. The pickup was big—big engine, king cab. The girl looked comically short behind the wheel but she handled the stick with sure, powerful motions. Not 15, he decided—18; maybe even older. She caught him watching her and didn't smile, but gestured at him with her chin.

"Is it AIDS?" she asked.

"No," said Paul, surprised, "Not AIDS."

"Good," said the girl. Lanny. They kept on driving down the long, bumpy road for a while, then she said: "I've got AIDS."

There was nothing in her voice, just the words.

"I'm sorry," said Paul, meaning it. Lanny shrugged.

After a couple of kilometers the road turned abruptly to gravel. The truck lurched but didn't slow. The moon lit the road, silvered the enormous fantail of dust that blossomed under the truck's roaring tires. It was too loud to talk so Paul just watched the road, watched the dark body of the Cariboo roll by, blurred by speed and darkness into the landscape of his dreams.

A DIFFERENT LIFE AGO

these same roads in daylight. Paul feeling guilty behind the wheel and the jeep flying around the curves as he pushed hard to get to the trailhead before dark.

He'd turned 28 that spring—a real grown-up all of a sudden: Full-time Forestry Prof. And he and Milou newly married after two years 'sharing space'; newly miscarried, too, it turned out. No big deal—only three weeks into a pregnancy that hadn't exactly been planned. And the timing had been bad anyway. They were both working too hard now. A family was part of the long-term future along with a house and a cabin in the woods and year-long sabbaticals in exotic countries. So really, it was no big deal. Only, strangely, it was; an unexpectedly deep cut that refused to heal up and go away.

So maybe they should go away instead.

"Let's do the ramble," Paul had said one evening, leaning into the door jamb of the little closet that served as Milou's home office. Milou at the drafting table, white spread of galleys under her hands.

She'd looked up at him then—a long, level stare that Paul simply could not read—and shook her head, no.

He'd half expected that. They'd talked about the ramble for years—a big, long camping trip, just the two of them, no trails, no maps—just a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and all the grizzly bears in BC's wild Pacific rain forest. Talked about it hardly at all these days, even before the bungled baby. Milou had a real job now too, editing art books for a small publisher in Vancouver. Her blank refusal didn't surprise him at all.

"Yeah," he'd agreed, turned back to the kitchen. But three steps

away and Milou called after him:

"*Vas t'en, si tu veux,*" she said. You go. If you want. She meant it too, he thought. Always in French when she was speaking from the heart, although her English was impeccable. Paul came back to stand beside her.

"I'd feel guilty," he said. He smoothed a dog-eared corner on the table's edge.

"You always feel guilty," said Milou. She was wearing her reading glasses—fashionably heavy black frames slid far down her nose. They made her look distracted, arch. She took them off, looked like Milou again. He knew she was right. Still, he hesitated.

"I'll tell you something," Milou said. "When you come back I want to try again." Paul felt something fall away inside him.

"Oh," he said. Then. "Are you sure?"

She looked up at him, face smooth, eyes unfathomable. "I'm sure," she said. "I want to have a baby now. For real. It doesn't really matter about the rest—money, time—there'll never be enough, *sais tu?*"

"I guess not," said Paul again and then, quietly: "Wow."

"Exactly wow," Milou answered, dryly. "So you better go now. Because *après le monstre ...*" She pantomimed turning a lock and throwing away the key.

"Wow," said Paul again, shaking his head. His heart ticked lightly in his chest—faint beats like a bird's heart. He tried to imagine Milou pregnant—pictured her belly a taut round ball under her dress. Still Milou. She had some solid inner core that was immutable.

She swung around in her chair then, took both of Paul's hands in hers, wound long fingers through his. Everything about her was long: hands, face, eyes—she was as tall as Paul and he wasn't short. He pulled her up into his arms, felt her weight as if her frame was something heavier than bone. He pressed his cheek against her cheek, lips brushing her ear.

"A baby," he whispered, still not sure what it meant to say that. To have that. A real live baby of their own.

"*C'est cela,*" Milou replied, holding tight against him. "C'est est." The French phrases had hung in Paul's head, beautiful, untranslatable: *It is that. That it is*—the meaning behind them ineffable and so much more than just the words. And he knew again that she was right—all the details paled to parings in the face of life's real possibilities.

"Okay," he said. "I'll go."

So now the big ramble condensed, constricted—just himself alone in the speeding jeep, the whole trip wedged into the 10 days of spring break and he'd have to stick to trails. And yet it wasn't anything like hurry or resentment that pressed the accelerator to the floor.

More like exultation. More like joy.

HE WOKE WHEN LANNY

turned the engine off. The pickup rattled to ticking silence in the pitch darkness. Somewhere dogs barked. Lanny hopped out of the truck, slammed the door shut. Paul tried the handle of his bashed-in door but it stuck. He slid across to the other door, Lanny's warmth still in the cracked vinyl, and let himself out. They were parked in front of a tin and plywood shack. In the dark all he could see was its crazy tilted outline, then light blossomed inside. Paul went toward the light.

Lanny's house was one big unfinished room—plywood floors, plywood walls. Light and heat came from a hissing kerosene heater in one corner of the room. Lanny sat on the edge of a mattress on the floor near the heater. As Paul came in she lit up a thin roll-y which turned out to be a joint. Then she put her legs, shoes, and all up on the mattress and leaned back against the wall. Paul sat on the other side of the mattress.

She passed him the joint, which he took, toked. It was skunkweed, thick and musky in the room like the aftertaste of sex. She laughed when he handed it back to her.

"You look so fucking straight," she said. He squinted at her in the yellow light but didn't answer.

Smoke in his lungs. The buzz was electric, boring hard into the back of his head. That's all it did though, didn't take him anywhere.

Paul watched the smoke curl out of his mouth, but took the joint back from her when she offered.

"You want a shotgun?" Lanny asked when he passed it back a second time. "You want to fuck?"

Paul shook his head.

"I don't really have AIDS," said Lanny. "Do you believe me? You can use a safe if you don't."

"Doesn't make any difference," said Paul.

"Why not?" Lanny asked. She'd folded her arms across her chest like they were having a fight.

"You want me out?" he asked. Lanny didn't answer, took the last pinched wedge of the roach, staring straight ahead.

Paul stood up.

"Why doesn't it make any difference?" she asked. Paul looked down at her, realized he was stoned though he wasn't sure he would be. Lanny was still staring straight ahead at her feet. Her eyes from this angle were crescents of dark glass beneath wet lashes, dark lids red-rimmed from the dope.

"Because I don't," he said and when her eyes flicked expectantly up to his face, added, flatly: "Fuck. Sorry."

Lanny's jaw worked.

"Stay?" she asked, sounding young again. "I won't be mean. I promise."

Paul sighed and sat down again. He knew he should go but he was too tired. Dope tired. Tired tired. Weeks and months and three days on the road, holding-everything-together tired. Maybe more than tired but too tired to tell. He hadn't imagined it would be this hard.

He swung his legs onto the mattress, lay back, and closed his eyes. Lanny covered them both with blankets that smelled of skunkweed and cedar and of having been slept in a lot without being washed—not a bad smell, only a close and overly intimate one.

Didn't make any difference. In a second or two he had sunk right down into sleep and though he half-woke over and over to feel the fierce heat of Lanny's back pressed hard along his, everything seemed to make sense and the whole night passed inside the thin skin of his dreams.

HE DREAMED OF HER

, as always, and of his childhood home. Not his parents' house in Richmond but the cabin in the research forest where he spent four perfect summers until his parents divorced when he was 13.

In his dream (or dreams, a new one starting each time Lanny's restless turning roused him), everything was as it really had been then. Left to himself he was "Tarzan, Wilderness Boy" for endless summer days wrapped in fantasy—following secret trails, dodging poison arrows, climbing impossible trees in his shorts and bare feet (and sometimes, secretly thrilling, swimming bare-naked in the creek in the ravine and coming out to lie on the warm, flat rocks feeling the summer air like silk scarves across his skin).

Except in the dream it seemed that he'd already found *her* then, that he'd known *her* as a boy, instead of as a man, and that she'd shown him her secrets then, when he'd wanted to know them, instead of later when they made no sense to him at all. In the false-memory dreams of his perfect childhood their union was pure and complete and he could be there forever, a boy again but not alone,

absolutely free and happy, one with the secret world. And he half-woke more than once to find his face wet and thought he must be crying in his sleep because it wasn't true.

WHEN PAUL WOKE

for real it was day. Lanny still slept beside him. Her whole face was soft; a ribbon of black hair plastered across her cheek. She looked more like 13 now. Hot gray light poured in through the curtainless windows. Paul could hear water hitting the ground outside. He got up and looked out the window.

Walter, the big counter guy from the Hollywood, was sitting at a card table in the yard. His back was to the house and he was drinking beer from a long-necked bottle. In one hand he held a garden hose, playing it over the grassless dirt in front of the house.

Paul splashed water from the tap on his face, sniffed his sweaty shirt and looked around for his pack. It was gone. Paul went outside. His pack sat open and sagging on the table in front of Walter, along with a half dozen empty longnecks.

"Taking off?" said Walter without turning around. He didn't sound drunk but Paul thought he probably was.

"Yeah," said Paul. He came around the table, pointed to his pack, asked: "You done with that?"

From this side he noticed that there were a bunch more long-necks laying in the muddy puddle under the card table, along with most of his things where the pack had been dumped out.

"Yeah, I'm done," said Walter. "Go ahead." Paul knelt down, picked through the mud-soaked mess of T-shirts, underwear, a fan of greenish Polaroids. Everything he owned. He frowned, rooted among the floating bottles.

Not everything. Paul stood up, looked inside the gutted pack. Empty.

"There was a carrying case . . ." he said, making the oblong shape of it with his hands, and at the same moment glancing up, recognizing the bulge in Walter's breast pocket.

"It's not heroin," said Paul. He assumed Walter had opened the hard, hinged case, seen the needle and ampoule bottle fitted in the slots inside. But Walter only shrugged.

"She tell you she has AIDS?" asked Walter, gesturing with the hose back toward the house.

"She told me," said Paul.

"She tell you she got it being some white boy's fucking junkie whore in Vancouver?" said Walter.

"No," said Paul, then: "Look, what's in there could hurt you." Walter took his thumb out of the hose. The spray became a stream. "She's my sister," said Walter. "That's my house. You still owe me for the bed."

"Sure," said Paul. He dug the wad of cash out of his jeans, unfolded it. "Three hundred dollars enough?"

Walter laughed. "Why not?" He took Paul's money, put it in his pocket.

"Can I have the case?" Paul asked.

"Get the fuck out of here," said Walter, "before I decide to kick the crap out of you."

Paul hesitated. Walter was a big guy, big slabs of muscle across his belly, across his chest pushing the needle case half out of his pocket, and Paul could almost see the anger crawling like St. Elmo's fire across the clenching muscles of his jaw and neck. There was really nothing of the ruined mess on the ground that he couldn't do without—clothes, the photos, the pack itself, even the money—none of it required any more, except for the appearance of normalcy and Paul knew he'd already crossed that line.

There was really only one thing he needed.

He started to turn away, took a half step and swung back around, made a sudden grab. His hand knocked the needle case out of Walter's pocket. He might have gotten away clean with it too, but it bobbed out of his hand onto the table and when he grabbed for it a second time, Walter grabbed him.

Walter snarled heavy drunken rage. Paul twisted to get away. The table rocked, beer bottles rattled and fell. Then Walter was on his feet. He lifted Paul with one open hand to the gut and drove him back a long way to slam hard against the bashed-in side of the pickup. It hurt like hell. All the air whooshed out of Paul's lungs. His legs buckled and he started to slide to the ground. Walter caught him by the shirt before he even thought to breathe, spun him around, punched him in the side of the head. Paul slammed back against the truck, heard glass breaking, found himself on hands and knees on the ground, vomiting, mouth erupting gouts of clear, thick fluid, ribboned with blood.

He heard somebody, a woman, yelling: "Jesus. Jesus. Jesus" Out of the corner of his eye he saw Walter's Kodiak boot pull way back, arc toward him. Paul cringed, felt it explode into his side, felt staggering pain and then a warm, wet surge...

Not here... not now... but warmth dragged him down, enveloped him.

The woman's cries grew faint, his vision blurred. He felt his muscles fail, felt himself sinking into yielding ground. There was another kind of shifting then, not in Paul's gut but in his mind—like pieces of a puzzle suddenly sliding into place: The world he understood unfolded like some secret mosaic and he was gone and she was there and there was nothing else but her...

SO THERE HE WAS

back in the forest—wilderness like he'd loved as a child, same burgeoning silence, same blue-green tang of cedar and spruce—and walking, rambling just like he'd wanted and yet something wasn't right. Not loneliness, but the opposite. He couldn't seem to lose himself, mind racing over the possibilities of the future, keeping him focused on his pinching shoes, complaining muscles, drip of his nose from the chill May air.

The day before had been the worst. Hours of walking only to step out of the trees into an enormous patch of clear-cut—the forest gone and in its place acres of roiled black earth tossed like waves and strewn with upturned stumps, torn skeins of leaves and the wrack of splintered branches turning gray. Hours to skirt the barren, treacherous terrain; mosquito-bitten and ankles turning in the soft earth and finally to find the trail again, light fading as he reached the next campsite and he had to set up in the dark.

Small campsite by a moon-brushed lake, pretty, but Paul laying frozen inside his sleeping bag hours, heart racing for no reason, alarming him until he realized the beat was coming from the ground itself and recognized the source: strange accelerating rhythm of a grouse's mating dance—wingbeats preternaturally resonant and just below the range of hearing. Like subsonics in a horror movie it felt distantly like terror, and even though he knew better it was a long time before he fell asleep.

And now he was paying for it in cranky discomfort and distraction and might as well go home a day early because this was worse than miserable and stumbling doggedly on just because that's what he'd planned to do. No joy at all and almost time to start heading back when, in a sudden shaft sunlight sprayed golden through a scrim of leaves, he saw the fen.

He stopped, breath coiling from his mouth in the chill morning air, and looked down into the eerily pretty nook two or three meters below the level of the trail. Dark moss like wet velvet draped an old fall of logs set in the sedge like crazy tilted stairs. Sunlight caught the spiraled tat of spider webs between the trees, made them glow like cloth of gold. And down at the bottom, nestled in jade shadows, a patch of flat, bright green. An impossibly emerald lawn, manicured as a leprechaun's putting green—but no, something shimmered there, glistened jewel bright in the misted sunlight. Water, Paul thought. The stagnant heart of the fen, matted with algae, rippled by the wriggle of tadpoles or skat of water-striders.

Paul felt a grin begin to grow. The woods still magic to his Tarzan heart; a rush in the blood he hadn't felt for ... well, for ever.

He peered down the side of the hill. The route to the fen was steep

and obviously dangerous. Even Tarzan, Wilderness Boy would have thought twice about descending into it. Yet there, down there in that green and slippery place, was the forest of his childhood. The place he'd come here to find, to lose himself in.

Down there was the thing he had been missing.

PAUL CAME UP

through layers of strange chittering dreams and knew he'd been gone a long time this time. He lay in the muck under the pickup, still paralytic, still enveloped head to toe in slime but aware now of the indriving ripple as the tide reversed.

Through the wavy liquid caul that still covered his face he could see Lanny. She sat on the ground, arms wrapped around her knees, rocking slightly.

He blinked as syrupy warmth receded from his eyes, his nose into his open mouth. He let the last of it slide down his throat before he swallowed, coughed, and took a deep convulsive breath. Ribs cracked sharply, then ached.

Lanny watched him silently, kept rocking. It was late—the sky was still light but the day was gone. Eight, nine hours out, he figured. He wondered if she'd been there the whole time.

Lanny said: "You didn't breathe at all."

Paul thought of lying, couldn't see the point. He was breathing now. Let her make of it what she would.

"No," he said. Lanny nodded.

Then she stretched, got stiffly to her feet.

"Walter's sleeping it off," she said. "You hungry?"

He wasn't but he could smell himself.

"I need a shower."

"Sure," said Lanny. "I'll show you." Something was ticking at his brain. He remembered the needle case.

Lanny took it out of the pocket of her skirt when he asked. She watched without comment as he opened it, checked to see that the contents were intact. Then she took him around the back. There was an outdoor oil drum shower: big tank over a ring of plastic curtain, wooden brick-palette for a floor, yellow chunk of soap in a scummy plastic dish.

Paul put the needle case on the window ledge to stay dry.

The water was surprisingly warm. He soaped himself then let the water flow over him for a while. He was more pleased than was reasonable to be clean again although bruises mottled his flesh.

Lanny was waiting with a towel and some clean clothes. She watched, frowning, as he dried himself. "You were hurt way worse than that," she said.

"Was I?" Paul asked, not looking up.

Lanny didn't answer but he knew he had been. He'd seen blood, felt the crunch when Walter's steel-toed boot stove his ribs in. Those ribs had been broken. They weren't broken now. Lanny handed him the clothes. The jeans were short and snug but they fit him okay; the shirt was Walter-sized. Paul rolled up the sleeves, put his own shoes on over damp bare feet, picked up the needle case and put it in his own breast pocket.

"I'm going to go now," he said when he was dressed.

"I'll give you a lift to the highway," said Lanny. Paul hesitated. He didn't need a lift because he wasn't going back to the highway. He was in-country now, not as close to the place as he'd planned, but close enough to walk it playing Tarzan, Wilderness Boy one more time. That's what he'd planned from the start. That's what he'd wanted. He didn't know how it would go from wherever Lanny took him. Not that it mattered. Paul shook his head, looked down.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess I'd like that."

THE WINDOW

on the passenger side of the pickup was shattered where Paul's head had gone through it; only a webby curtain of tiny glass cubes hung from the frame. Paul tore away part of it, left it laying on the ground; brushed a handful of glass cubes off the

seat and got in. Lanny disappeared into the house for a second, came back with Paul's pack and a worn denim purse hung with a feathered roach clip. She tossed both bags on the bench seat beside Paul then jumped up after them. When she turned the key in the ignition the engine growled like a cougar.

Lanny drove fast and neither of them said a word all the way down the gravel road so it wasn't like they made a plan or a decision, but when they stopped at the T-intersection Lanny asked "Which way?" and Paul, understanding somehow that from the moment she offered the ride that she intended to keep on driving whether she went in his direction or not, pointed northeast on 45. The pickup's tires crunched in the transition from gravel to blacktop and with the red ball of the sun throwing their shadow forward into the dusty, orange glare Lanny punched the accelerator and they sped north toward the heart of the Cariboo.

WHEN HE THOUGHT ABOUT IT

later it seemed as though stepping over the edge of the fall had been like stepping into an ancient cairn: he'd climbed down easily—all aches and pains forgotten; all worries washed away in the healing, holy cold; the cleansing silence—so much denser and deeper than the lively quiet of the woods.

At the bottom he'd found the place bigger than it had seemed from above. The algaed nook turned out to be just the pointed corner of a pond shaped like an inverted comma. The rest curled around a shelved spire of rock and there, overhung by cedar sedge, he found the real heart of the fen—a black water tarn ringed by mosses. Ghost green and aqua and jade; shot through with veins of bilious yellow and vibrant, clotted red and all of it glistening with myctozoa—vast colonies of slime molds that slicked the fenscape like handfuls of Vaseline. A mycologist's dream find, but Paul had left Professor Keogh up there on the trail and was seeing the fen through Wilderness Boy's eyes—a magic place, a faerie place; window to the forest's soul.

How long he explored the fen, Paul could never say. Hours he supposed, to circle the pond from edge to edge—finding new beauty in every angle of light, every glistening alcove festooned with fruiting body stalks—sporangiae like angel hair belled at the ends with spores or flared like trumpets—all of it the work of some mad, ingenious sculptor; every muted sound echoing in polyharmony like church choirs. Blissful, mindless of time or direction, still he came eventually to find himself on the other side of the angled emerald nook looking at the impossibly sheer fall he'd descended. He'd thought vaguely to hop across here, climb back up to the woods, make camp, but the span of water was too wide, the temptingly flat green plane impossible to cross unaided and nothing here—no log to make a bridge over the algae-skinned water.

He was aware then of being cold, of being wet, boots and pantlegs heavy with slime where he'd knelt to look closer at some dripping fern or bryophyte. And the light changing, not twilight yet, but the sun sank fast behind the sharp teeth of the Cariboo mountains.

So then, bliss fading with the light, his teeth chattering, he turned back, hurried past dripping hollows, less sure-footed, sliding on the slippery hummocks, ankles turning in unexpected holes. And even rushing as he was, twilight beat him to the fall—Paul stumbling in the unlight, buzzed by clouds of mosquitoes, unable to find climbable holds in the steep, slick walls.

And cursing as he tried anyway, numb hands and wet boots slipping off the velvet rocks and finally one really good fall bruised knees, knuckles, and chin and he tasted blood and knew in that moment he wasn't going to make it back up that hill in darkness.

And, well, that wasn't as bad as all that. Cold and wet already but he had his pack, little turtle of a tent, sleeping bag and space blanket, stove and food. He made his way back around the darkening shore—real darkness then, filling the fen like black water, even his flashlight just a little dot of white clarity unable to spread. He found a relatively flat, relatively dry hummock and set up his tent, stripped

off wet clothes, and wrapped himself in sleeping bag and blanket. He warmed his fingers over the tiny stove and chewed a sheet of jerky in its faint blue propane light and then, tired and cold but strangely happy, crawled into his tent and fell instantly asleep.

FOR 30 MILES

to Canim Lake the road was curvy two-lane blacktop that stayed flat although steep hills rose on either side of it. The hills were furrowed with evergreen, quilt-patched here and there with brown squares of clearcut. Cold velvet wind poured into the cab through the broken window but there was nothing Paul could do about it. Lanny toked a joint as she drove, the ember pulsing cherry red while the wind made her hair dance around like cold black flame.

Paul looked up from watching the white lines flash away under their wheels and caught her looking fierce and crazy behind the wheel and thought if they'd been heading somewhere else he could run like this for a long, long time.

"Hey," he shouted over the roar of the road.

"What?" Lanny shouted back. But he didn't have an answer. There was nowhere else, really, to go. Paul shook his head and spread his hands apart in a helpless shrug.

"Nothing," he shouted, waving at the road. "Just drive." Lanny turned her head and looked at him through the narrowed corners of her eyes, her expression flat and somehow sly. Paul shivered and looked away, and when he looked back her eyes were on the road again and he was both sorry and relieved that he hadn't said more.

BY THE TIME

they reached the lake the sun had dropped below the level of the mountains and the orange and pink sky had lost its neon tone. There were no campsites along the lakeshore, but Lanny slowed down to look, and when they finally found a rest stop she yanked the wheel and came to a sudden stop on the rutted ground.

"You okay?" Paul asked. Lanny didn't answer but it was clear she wasn't really. Her skin, even in the dim light, had a cheesy, chalky look to it and the corners of her mouth turned down. She sat staring straight ahead for a while, then abruptly turned the ignition off and made a dash for the outhouse. The horrible and familiar sounds of sickness drifted out across the quiet air.

When she came out Paul could see she was shaking. She opened her purse and rattled through the marimba band of plastic bottles in the bottom, ended up with a fistful of pills which she took to the water's edge and downed with water she scooped from the lake. She was steadier when she came back, but still pale.

"What're you looking at, Johnny?" she snapped as she got back in the truck.

"You want me to drive?" Paul asked. She looked at him squinting like she was pissed off and going to tell him so, but instead she just nodded, set the brake.

Paul slipped behind the wheel, touched the Lanny-warmed plastic and the stick and felt around for the clutch with his feet. It had been a long time since he'd driven anything. Cautiously he put the pickup into reverse and backed onto the road. The truck stalled for a second, growling as he ran it to first. Paul glanced apologetically at Lanny, but she'd wrapped herself up in one of Walter's flannel shirts and fallen instantly asleep it seemed. Whether it was trust or just exhaustion, it buoyed his confidence and as if the time since he'd last been behind the wheel had vanished, Paul turned the pickup smoothly onto the road and drove.

MOONLIGHT HAD WOKED HIM

The inside of the dome tent lit up like pale, silver day and, tired as he was, Paul couldn't get back to sleep. Restless then; too much light; too hot; too cold and the insistent drip-drip of water outside making him have to pee. Finally he rose, slipped on boots and dry shorts, wrapped the silver space

blanket around his bare shoulders, and crawled out of the tent ... to find the fen transformed to quicksilver and chrome. Everything gleamed so strikingly silver that Paul had to reach out, touch the moss beyond the tent flap half expecting the cold hardness of metal. It wasn't just the slime molds silvered by moonlight as they collected together for the night. That was the dripping sound too—slime mold falling from the surrounding branches like gelid water. An amazing sight. Not unusual for slime molds to collect together into larger mobile colonies but he'd never seen so many in one place—everywhere, clotting together into little mound rolls like translucent slugs.

Paul rose from the tent, shivering in chill air that was still not as cold as he might have expected. He walked a distance from the tent and peed, then came back to sit on a relatively dry lip of rock nearby and watch the show.

And show it was. All highlighted in brilliant moonlight. Paul sat like a child at a circus, watching the glacial but perceptible accretion of the slug form pseudoplasmodia into even larger patches. Slow drip and downward side and the growing sense of strangeness as he realized all the colonies were moving down toward the silver-black water of the pond.

They were forming a mass there and no, he realized—mouth gone dry now, heart racing—there already was a mass there—faint ripples under the mirrored surface of the water as the slow accretion made it bob. Or rise.

And Paul, down to the pond's edge then, and seeing the mass was immense, as big as the pond itself, translucent as the water. He flicked the flashlight on it, and was amazed to see, ambered within, bugs and fish, tiny frogs. And more tiny creatures scuttling across its surface. And racking his brain for gleanings from years-ago undergrad mycology courses, coming up with one vaguely remembered slide of a slime mold like a melted plastic vase on a bump of lichenized rock, and mired in it something like a beetle.

Yeah, they did this; came together into animal-like creatures, ate, hunted, mated in slow motion like rust—arguments in the literature—genus with characteristics of both plant and animal.

But nothing like this. He'd never heard of anything like this. And watching, teeth chattering in his head then, as the enormous mass roiled beneath the water, turned up deeper treasures from below: big frogs; hand-sized trout. A crow.

The small black form rose to the surface as the mass rolled. The bird was perfectly preserved, each feather slicked with slime and clearly limned by the flashlight's glare. And the slime peeling away from the feathers, the curled black feet, the bright black eye ...

The crow blinked.

"Christ!" Paul had barked, stepping back into squelching wetness. The flashlight beam danced crazily among the silvered edges of the fen as he windmilled to keep his balance, ice cold water slopping over the ankles of his untied boots.

By the time Paul got back to solid footing, the crow had hopped away from the pond's edge. Paul flashed the light around, found it on a branch of cedar sage preening indignantly. The light touched it and it cawed, the sound muted and harsh. Then with a rustled flap of its wings the crow launched itself up, up into darkness and was gone.

Later Paul remembered staring after it, heart pounding against his breastbone like a fist but not from fear. The feeling that rushed up inside him, iced the length of his nerves from end to end wasn't fear ...

He'd swung the light back around to the pond. The water boiling lightly now with more newly freed life—hopping frogs, skittering bugs. The frenzied expulsion went on for a while, then tapered off as the escaping creatures took refuge in the night. When the water stilled again Paul could see the translucent mass had become clean and smooth, a glassy bubble just beneath the water's surface. The moon reflected bright across smooth mass, making it a moon too—a second silvery disc in a pool of black sky.

Paul remembered being aware then of the return of sound, the gentle whisper of wind in the woods above the sedge, the rustle and

skitter of small creatures in the underbrush. Chipmunks chittering.

One came out from under the sedge by the water. With chipmunk perkiness it approached the water, stopped, sniffing. Paul squatted down where he was to watch—arms loose across his bare knees, the blanket sagging off his shoulder although he didn't remember feeling cold. The chipmunk seemed fascinated by the slime—it sniffed and tipped its head. It scampered away and then returned. Over and over, closer each time, but then no, Paul realized with another burst of adrenaline rush—it was the slime that was getting closer, the accretion process in reverse sheets attenuated glacially into strands that swelled and broke off into clumps, gradually encircling the chipmunk where it stood.

And at the end it was simply motionless, entranced as the slime crept over its limbs. Paul could see it trembling faintly in the ultraclear light, but it never tried to escape, never twitched even as the slime crept slowly over its head and began to roll it back to the water's edge.

A thought occurred to Paul then. An odd thought, and a nervous flutter of laughter escaped him as he looked down to see the pooled slime well over the ankles of his sodden boots, nudging gently up against his fingers where they draped against his calves. When he thought about what happened next, he told himself it must have been some kind of neurotoxin, contact poison emanated by the myctozoid to paralyze and seduce its prey.

It had to be. How else to explain why he didn't run. Didn't even try to stand. Why instead he simply waited, watching as the slime rose like a slow-motion wave to his chest, his chin, his lips, and higher still, its weight pulling him gently over onto his side.

How else to explain that even as it began to roll him slowly down toward the silver mass below, the frantic pounding of his heart was not caused by terror, but by some strange, darkened longing that he could hardly believe to be his own.

THE SUN WENT DOWN

and the Moon was already out. A few miles after they left the lake behind the road turned north and changed; becoming a forest road—a gravel roller-coaster that rose sharply up into the hills. Solid walls of cedar and spruce bounded so close on either side that Paul felt like he was driving up the middle of a dark, winding cattle chute and the logging truck that roared down at them from around a blind curve would have caught them head on if he hadn't drifted toward the edge looking for a break in the trees.

The flatbed fired the air horn as it passed but didn't slow. Paul slewed the pickup through spraying gravel but held the wheel and recovered. Wiping cold sweat off his forehead Paul glanced at Lanny but the near miss hadn't even awakened her. Frowning, Paul touched her shoulder, was shocked to feel the furnace heat radiating off her. After that the driving soured and he hugged the trees, scouting for headlights in the opaque darkness until finally he saw the sign for No Name Lakes. The road forked and he took the northern branch, a still narrower stretch of rutted, hard-packed dirt that hadn't even been graveled.

They bounced over tire tracks and gouges preserved in hardened mud. Paul's heart sank when he saw the yellow glow of firelight up ahead, but there was no choice but to push forward, even if it was only to turn around if the tiny campsite was full.

To his relief there was only one vehicle in the clearing that fronted on the tiny fishing lake—a small pickup with an old piggyback trailer on the back. The occupants, an elderly couple who looked like an advertisement for a healthy retirement, sat on lawn chairs in front of a bonfire. They waved as Paul drove in, raising their coffee mugs like long-lost friends. Paul pulled the pickup onto a flat stretch of grass as far from the fire as he could get.

Lanny was still sleeping so he got out on the far side of the truck and looked around for a place to pee. Moonlight and firelight lit a marked trail. Paul followed it to the outhouse and stepped inside the musky darkness.

God it felt good to be back.

Even the crap and chemical smell of the outhouse couldn't over-

take the sharp, secret tang of cedar, the warm breath of the woods.

She sensed it too. Paul felt the oddly arousing slide of her as a clear thin strand snaked out of his penis and hung there swaying gently like a blind transparent worm.

He didn't fight her this time—instead slid his hand along the underside of his hardening cock to let her flow over his open palm and fingers. He held her up as if to let her see, not knowing if it made any difference at all but wanting to communicate somehow—connect. No sign from her—no sudden message in his brain, not even an incomprehensible one. She just flowed like a liquid vine over his hand and after a little while withdrew back up inside him and his penis was his own again and he peed and went back up to the clearing.

TO HIS SURPRISE

Lanny was up and sitting by the old folk's campfire, holding a steaming mug of coffee between her hands.

The man rose as Paul approached and stuck out his hand. He was a big man despite his age, with silver hair, a bulbous nose, and clear light-colored eyes.

"Bill and Nat Reid," he said with a salesman's easy camaraderie.

Paul wiped his own hand self-consciously before he took the older man's hand, shook it,

"Paul Keogh," said Paul, automatically. "And Lanny ..." He stopped, awkward at not knowing her last name. Bill nodded and glanced back at his wife. There was a moment's awkwardness that reminded Paul that they'd been talking when he'd emerged.

"How about a cup of hot coffee, Paul?" Bill asked, puncturing the silence. "Or you want to set up your gear first?"

"Thanks," said Paul, "but we're not staying. You ready?" he asked Lanny. She sighed and stood up without answering, holding out her half-full cup to Bill.

"At least finish it," said Bill not taking the cup. Lanny looked at Paul who shrugged. "And you too, Paul. Come on, it's a hell of a drive down that hill at night" There was something insistent in his voice and Paul was suddenly aware of how suspicious they must look—his bruised face, the truck window busted, Lanny looking 15 again wrapped in Walter's oversized jacket—and the two of them reeking of pot. From the long antenna on the truck roof, Paul guessed Bill had a CB or a radio-tel. It might be hours or days before an RCMP detachment turned up to check them out but still ... The smell of strong coffee rose up, cut across the woodsmoke and Paul saw that the wife—Nat—had her enormous thermos open. He looked at Lanny. Her eyes were wide, jaw set with fatigue. He wondered why she was leaving it up to him. But she was.

"That's very kind of you," he said, trying to sound gracious. "Thanks."

BILL TOLD HIM

not to mention it and hauled another lawn chair and a couple of camp blankets ("just in case") out of the hatch of the camper. Nat poured coffee which Paul accepted, and brought out a Tupperware full of homemade cookies. Lanny took one and Nat held out the tub and said:

"Go on, hon. Take a couple," in a gravely smoker's voice that reminded Paul of his ex-mother-in-law, a woman he'd liked very much. Within a few minutes they were ensconced in front of the fire, cozy as kids in their blankets with Bill tipping brandy from a plastic flask into their coffee, telling them about the trip up from Oregon and their plan to drive up to Alaska and take the ferry back down.

"That's a long way," said Paul, breathing in the acetone reek of cheap brandy under the coffee perfume.

"Not the way we travel," said Nat, chuckling.

"Truth," said Bill. "You know that joke about the guy whose doctor tells him to walk three miles a day and the guy calls him a month later and tells him he's in California and should he turn around or just switch to swimming? That's us. When I retired from sales in '92 our accountant Sandy Miller said: 'Bill, retirement for

a guy like you is just waiting to die. You and Nat ought to take a road trip, get out and see the world.' And after a couple of weeks I thought, why not? Why the hell not? So we sold the house and bought the camper and hit the road."

"We called Sandy from Mendocino," said Nat. "He thought Bill had lost his mind."

"He was yelling his head off," said Bill, laughing. "But we got him settled down."

"We come back around to see our daughter's boys in Eugene once a year, but otherwise we're full-time gypsies."

Paul smiled at the couple's easy way with each other, picking up threads of a story they must have told a hundred times together. He thought obliquely of the Polaroids of Milou laying in the mud under Lanny's card table. Those photos were old and even with them he couldn't really remember what she looked like. Still, he wished he'd picked them up, wiped the mud off the faces.

"So how about you kids?" Bill was asking. "Heading for parts unknown?"

"More or less," said Paul, dropping his gaze. He didn't want to lie to them and when Bill leaned forward conspiratorially Paul was sure he was going to have to. But Bill only held out the brandy flask, tilted to pour.

"No," said Paul. "Thanks." Bill poured the last of the brandy into his own cup and drank it down. After that, the conversation subsided like ripples in a pond and the four of them sat in silent, dreamy camaraderie and listened to the voiceless roar of the fire tell the wordless stories of their lives.

WHAT HE REMEMBERED

was the longing. Remembered how he'd ached with it, caught up in the creature's strange embrace. Longing alien yet familiar. Unfocused: with nothing—no *thing*, no object to the want, just wanting, yearning like an infant must yearn for things that have no names yet—mother, breast, warmth, light. The basic stuff of life, and yet unknown except by longing's sudden cease.

And so Paul had floated, weightless in silver and silence. Not warm or cold. Not breathing—last exhalation bubbled thickly away as the slime filled his nose, throat, chest—but no breath coming and no need. Small twinge like fear as he felt it move inside him—deep strange aches in his bowels, behind his eyes—but no panic and no real pain, just *wanting* ...

So, floating for time uncounted, mind adrift as if in a dream. He might have been dreaming too. No way to differentiate waking from sleeping; dream from memory as past, present, reality, fantasy rose and mingled in his thoughts. Long, slow sweep of life before his eyes, not flashing by but rolling past with movie clarity: himself, daydreaming as he swung from the branch of an ancient research forest maple; scuffing asphalt in a lonely corner of the schoolyard; leaning against a wall at some undergrad party, beer in hand, and no one he knew by more than sight. Memories too of studying; reading books—almost as though he were reading them again—not just seeing his life again, but reliving every moment of it in full detail: every thought and every feeling of the past 28 years and yet still aware of now, of himself watching events unfold, waiting ...

And then the subtle shift, a change in intensity, or maybe just a blossoming of understanding and Paul had known he was not dreaming or remembering but rather he was being remembered; being dreamed in a way—the sensory mind-pictures milked from his brain as if by gentle stroking hands.

Whose hands? Was there a *sometime* in there watching the procession of events or was this just electrochemical static, the friction of the slime's passage across his synapses?

And pondering this as he met Milou again for the first time, he wondered if she were the soulmate for whom he'd waited lonely for so long. The same question asked over and over with each remembered kiss, each fight, each long, sensual fuck ...

And Paul had been aware then that he was coming in the present tense, waves of ecstasy interspersed with the daily grind of life lived;

driving to the university, lectures and chalk dust thick on his hands and coming home to happiness, sadness—the baby coming; the baby gone. *Nefast*—Milou's word for it. Unlucky. And coming again as they fucked gently the night before he left. Coming now and in memory, guilt rising because Milou had lain beneath him affectionate but unaroused; half-lidded gaze and kissing his cheek—*ca va, cherie*—as she rolled away from him. And staring at the long curve of her back. Guilt and loneliness and dreaming of the ramble to come. And then the dream coming true, the drive and walking and descending to the fen. Himself in the tent, rising, walking down to the shore and waiting, wanting. The first gentle nudge against his flesh; his fall...

And here. And now.

Past and present merged. A stillness fell within—last page of the story read, last reel flapping in the spool. The stroking hand withdrew, memories subsided into silence,

Alone.

And what had he been before if not alone? The question floated inside Paul's floating mind—unanswerable, it was a state that had no name. *Not alone; with*. But with no other.

No way to put words to it but, sharp relief: the longing finally known—the state finally differentiated from its absence, which was all he'd ever known before.

Even with Milou, best beloved, all he'd ever been before—all he could ever be—was alone.

And now, alone again. Entombed in strangeness. Waiting. Wanting...

The growing spasm of despair as the silence stretched. He'd had it; he'd lost it. He could not bear to think of never being *with* again. Of being alone again forever. And forever passing in silence and silver and the unheard beating of his dying heart.

And then, a single burning flower unfolding in his mind. No words, no nothing he could ever name but like the difference between day and night. Not alone. And gentle, wordless stroking, his own thoughts stuttering like a misstated station. A sense of presence, quiet watcher at his shoulder. Waiting. Wanting.

And: Please...he had cried, wordlessly. Please...and something did and something had and it, no...she—some expression so innately female it couldn't be anything but she—was there with him and he with her and never more to be alone.

THE FIRE SPAT

and Paul glanced up, train of thought forgotten—some snippet of memory rising: summer with Milou's family near Qualicum Beach. The two of them flying down the Island Highway in the open jeep. Milou in a red tank top one time, her dark hair whipping around her face, squinting into the Sun as she turned to him to say ... what? He didn't remember.

"So, what kind of real estate did you sell?" he asked Bill, apropos of nothing, to break the fire's spell.

"Luxury townhouses," Bill answered. "Time-share condos. Big dreams in small packages. Why, you looking to settle down?"

Paul shook his head, made something like a laugh.

"Furthest thing from my mind," he said. But even that was kind of a lie. They sat a while longer as the moon climbed to a spot directly above the dark glitter of the lake, then Nat pushed the afghan off her lap.

"I'm off," she said.

"Yeah," said Bill, yawning, scratching his ribs with his thumb. "Bout that time." He made no move to rise. Nat disappeared into the camper, came out with a lantern and a roll of toilet paper and headed off down the outhouse trail.

"I guess we should go too," said Paul.

"Your girlfriend's asleep," said Bill. Paul looked at Lanny and saw that she was—curled up like an armadillo, her small shoes under the chair making an off-kilter 'V'. Paul sighed. He shouldn't have brought her along. Only he hadn't brought her, she'd just come.

"We've got some extra gear," Bill went on, "for the boys when they come camping with us. I'll put it out for you. If you stay, you might as well be warm."

Paul didn't argue. He got up and followed Bill around to the trailer trunk behind the camper, stood with his arms out to take the sleeping bags, tarp, blankets that Bill handed him. Then Bill closed up the trailer, took the top sleeping bag off the precarious pile under Paul's chin.

"Diabetic?" Bill asked conversationally, nodding at the needle case sticking out of Paul's pocket. Paul didn't know what he meant for a minute, could only stammer something noncommittal, hating even now to lie. His murmur good enough though, to his surprise.

"Nat's a Type II," Bill went on as he turned to walk back to the fire.

"You get to recognize the accessories."

They set down the sleeping bags, and Bill helped him stake out the tarp. Nat passed them on her way back to the trailer.

"Night all," she said as she opened the door.

"There in a minute," Bill called after her. He turned back to Paul.

"You kids'll be okay," he said, sounding more hopeful than convinced. Paul nodded and Bill added: "Mind the fire."

"I will," said Paul. He hesitated, then stood, jerked his head back toward Lanny and the pile of gear.

"Thanks for this, Bill," he said, as if they really were old friends. "Thank Nat." Bill nodded, one hand on the camper door.

"You take care now, Paul," he said and went inside.

Waves of ecstasy interspersed with the daily grind of life lived.

WITH THE REIDS GONE

the night got big again. The fire sank and died; worms of bright embers crawled frantically beneath the blackened logs like secret writing. The wind picked up again, cold and piney—it rustled and snuffed through the brush like a bear, urging Paul to go. Go now ... More than an urge. He could feel the slide of her in his blood, the fractal unraveling of understanding as she moved across his mind. This was the time, he thought. This was nearly the place. His hand went automatically to the needle case and he felt his heart trip like a hammer in his chest.

Paul kicked the fire out. Doused it with the bucket, turned the ashes and doused it again. The smell of sodden charcoal filled the air.

He turned back and looked at Lanny, still curled in the nylon web chair. She'd be fine there, he told himself. It wouldn't rain. No bears would come. The Reids would take care of her in the morning. He turned away, then changed his mind, took one of the sleeping bags and laid it over her.

"Time to go?" she asked, blinking, uncurling. Paul shook his head, no.

"I'm going," he said. "You'll be warmer in the truck."

"No way," said Lanny, sitting up suddenly, feet on the ground. "I'm coming with you."

"Lanny" said Paul. He spread his hands helplessly, shook his head.

"Yeah, yeah," Lanny said, crossly, slipping her feet back into her shoes. "You're not coming back. I know that."

Paul blinked and felt her pool up in his eyes like tears. He sat back on his heels, frowned at Lanny.

"Then wh—" he swallowed. "Why did you come?"

Lanny looked pissed off again but then she shook her head and her face went soft. She reached out and touched the knuckle of her index finger to the soft skin under Paul's eye. A fat gelid tear rolled

over his lower lid onto Lanny's finger. It snaked sideways along the finger, flattened over it like a glossy slick. Then it retracted, reforming into a teardrop and sliding back up into Paul's eye without leaving a track.

Lanny took her dry finger away and rubbed it thoughtfully with her thumb.

"Nine hours," she said. "You didn't breathe. You didn't bleed. And when you woke up you were better." Paul stared at her, honestly shocked..

"It's not a cure for AIDS, Lanny," he said.

"How do you know?"

"It's not a cure for anything," he said, voice suddenly angry in the sharp night air. "It's a—it's alive. It lives inside me."

"So?"

"So I can't just give her away" The words rang out over the water and echoed back thinly. Lanny just stared, hard and unblinking. Then she shrugged.

"You'll be dead," she said, flatly.

"What ... ?" he asked, almost laughing the question. Lanny didn't laugh. She poked a finger into his chest, flicked the needle case through the cloth of his breast pocket.

"It doesn't take a fucking genius," she said. "You're going to do yourself. I know that. I won't stop you."

Paul shook his head.

"Lanny ..." whispered, helpless. How could he explain? And was she so far from the truth? Do himself. He was definitely going to do himself, no matter what the truth beneath the action, the outcome would be the same: alive or dead, he wasn't coming back. But why explain? What business of hers was it anyway what he did? And yet it felt somehow important to set the record straight.

"It's not what you think—" he began and then, sharp drop and slide—he *felt* her turn within, felt his eyes grow wet and not with tears.

Time's up. Too late for explanations now. He should go. Get up right now and start walking. He glanced over at the hidden trail beside the lake, saw the moonlight carving silver crescents from the water. He felt Lanny's hot, dry palm brush against his cheek.

Don't ... he mouthed, but no sound came out. Her hand scraped his stubbled jaw, turned his face toward her. He looked up, blinking back wetness, and met her eyes. No sharpness there at all—no words, no judgments. Just her—dark eyes, flat pockmarked cheeks. He didn't know what she was offering. Didn't know what he would take. But she was there.

Somewhere far away in the bush something barked.

Paul nodded slowly.

Lanny smiled a strange, eager half-smile and slipped her hot, dry hand into his own.

Then Paul stood and Lanny stood after him and the two of them walked together down to the trail by the lake.

HE'D GONE HOME

Long drive, no sleep. The flat was empty when he got there; mid-afternoon quiet and the house buzzing with pale yellow light. Paul wandered the rooms like a ghost. Into the silent office-closet, to stare at Milou's drafting table still spread with the latest project: glossy cover mock-up—elongated wood nymph all in brackish greens, crimson lake and gold filigree. *Les Dames Verts* in elaborate gothic script.

The picture reminded Paul of Milou and suddenly he missed her terribly, wanted to hold her, hide in her arms, tell her about the thing that had happened to him.

Which was ... ?

He didn't know. Something wonderful, terrible. Maybe nothing at all.

HE HAD AWAKENED

with the dawn to find himself curled

up like sea wrack on a mossy hummock. Still wearing shorts and soggy boots, the space blanket clutched around his shoulders, face pressed hard into damp moss—

Alone.

Really alone. No sign of last night's strange encounter—no sign of the mycetozooid at all in the pale charcoal light. The moss was wet with dew and nothing else; the green glass surface of the pond so still that curls of morning mist spiraled straight up like smoke from tiny votive candles.

And Paul, rising numbly to dress, pack up tent and stove. Remembering bliss but not its end: the bliss of *with*, the bliss of *her*. And nothing now. To search the fen, stir the silent water, sending ripples out to shatter the misty web and find nothing but water and moss, the drip of condensation and of dew and nothing more.

So had it been a dream? It must have been. It couldn't have been. The inner argument irresolvable. And would it be better if it had? Yes. Maybe. No. He didn't know.

But waiting, waiting and nothing happening now and the fen felt empty. And finally, shouldering pack and climbing the slippery log fall to set his feet back on the trail. Paul stopped at the edge, looked back down one last time. The fen was dark and empty. Nothing there anymore to call him down. Or had there ever been?

And walking back to the trailhead and the jeep, and driving back along the roads, the see-saw rocking from despair to relief to disbelief. And how could a dream have affected him so deeply? And how could it have been anything but a dream?

IT MADE HIM WANT TO CRY.

He didn't though, just left the office for the bedroom, lay down fully dressed on the bedclothes. He thought of taking a shower but fell asleep instead.

His dreams were blurred, unsettling, furiously erotic; he was running. Then he and Milou were fighting or wrestling and she spat on him. Then he was back in the fen, only it was a different fen and he was copulating wildly with a woman whose hair was the brackish green of weeds curled and coiled like unborn ferns. The coils of green began uncurling as the woman's hips arched to his. Their motion eerily familiar, deeply arousing. He wanted to keep watching the strange woman's hair but he also wanted to keep fucking her. And then he was too excited. He felt himself start to come and did—a strangely attenuated orgasm that carried him out of sleep like a wave.

He opened his eyes to smudgy twilight darkness, half turned to find that Milou had come home, was spooned up behind him on the bed still dressed in her office skirt and sweater. She stirred against his back, her long arms slipping around him.

"*Tu m'est manqué,*" she murmured, breath warm against his neck. Strange French reversal of terms—you *from me were missing*—like a mathematical formula for loss.

"Me too," said Paul. He glanced over his shoulder, but didn't roll over to face her, embarrassed by the surprising warmth of wetness down his thigh.

"It was okay, your ramble?" Milou asked.

"Fine," said Paul, automatically. "Good." He looked away, wanting badly to get up, shower, wash the bog away.

"We'll do it better next time," said Milou, squeezing his hand. "I promise." Paul nodded.

"Next time," he echoed vaguely. And: *tell her*. Tell her what? That he'd had a dream? That he'd been swallowed by something in the woods and they had—what? What had he done that felt so like betrayal? And should he tell her too he didn't know if it had been a dream? That he wasn't sure he'd wanted it to be?

Milou's cool fingers brushed his face.

Paul remembered he'd shivered then, suddenly feverishly hot and cold. The clammy dampness along his thigh clung unpleasantly to his skin, making him queasy. The room had been reduced by night to shades of gray and he couldn't remember what color anything was. The air itself seemed to be filled with the oscillation of tiny jew-

eled particles, insubstantial as the pulse of blood behind his eyes. An unexpected wave of nausea passed through him and he swallowed, sat up, breathing hard.

"Paul?" Milou asked. He didn't answer but rose abruptly, ran to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him to stand over the toilet, retching up thin acid bile in racking spasms that went on even after there was nothing left to come up.

When it finally stopped, Paul stood up, shaking. And caught sight of himself in the mirror—white face, dark stubble, dark wings under his eyes. Dark stain of sticky wetness at his crotch and halfway down his leg. He shivered, hugged himself.

"Paul . . ." Milou's voice, soft concern against the door. Paul turned, stared at the knob.

What if it hadn't been a dream? What if . . . ?

Excitement rising in his chest like wine. Shivering, teeth chattering, eyes reflecting glassy in the bathroom's yellow light. Paul turned the hot water on in the tub and began to strip off his clothes. The small bathroom filled with chilly steam, whorls of condensation forming on the mirror. He watched the fog lay patterns on the glass. Beautiful. Familiar. Like the dream-woman's hair, coiling and uncoiling.

Another knock, startling him. Milou forgotten at the door.

"Are you all right?" she had asked, voice rising in concern but faint below the thunder of water. "Paul? Answer, please."

Hard to answer now, like pulling himself up from sleep, from deep erotic dreams. He was hard again already; something heavy rising in his throat; alien slide deep in his gut, behind his eyes, across the surface of his thoughts. The burning flower. Not alone. He knew . . .

"I'm fine," he'd answered thickly. "I'll be fine."

And then, not taking his eyes from the play of haze and clarity in the mirror, he reached out and locked the bathroom door.

THE BOTTOM OF THE TRAIL

was easy and to Paul's amazement, talk came easily too. Confessional darkness of the woods, their feet swishing through long grass and kicking up the pineapple scent of chamomile. He told her some of it anyway—told her what he'd looked for, what he'd found. What he hoped to find again. And not, he hoped but did not say, in death.

Lanny was quiet; a rustle of heat beside him; hand a furnace ember in his hand. She said little, offered no opinions, but Paul felt her listening intently in the dark.

The trail took them into and out of the trees, brought them out around the curve of another pond, small but beautiful; forest jewel. Black water; ribbon of moonlight shifting like ivory silk on the water's skin.

Lanny stooped, picked up a handful of stones, threw one. Tiny splash, fragments of light shuddered as the ripple rolled outward to the water's finite edge.

"So . . . what will you do?" Paul found himself asking. "After . . ."

Lanny shrugged.

"Don't know," she said, sounding angry again. She gestured toward the needle case in his pocket. "Maybe I'll use up what's left. Get off this fucking ride."

"Don't," Paul blurted, oddly shocked. "It's not—it would be an awful way to die."

Lanny gave him a caustic look, arms folded, eyebrows raised—but Paul couldn't let go.

"People live a long time with AIDS now," he said. "They come up with better treatments every year."

"What's your point?" Lanny asked flatly. Paul found himself lost for words, feeling stupid, awkward, full of platitudes: Just hang in there, kid. Maybe it's not so bad. Hey, miracles happen every day . . . As if her life, her loss, her dreams were a one-solution puzzle, something easily fixable and so much simpler than his own.

"I guess it doesn't mean too much, coming from me," he said. Lanny shrugged.

"I don't know," she said. "I think about it sometimes. About doing myself, about just not being here for this. And then I think—fuck lis-

ten to yourself girl—it's not some magic thing I'm going to turn to mist and fade away—it's fucking dying. Fucking making my life die . . ."

"And that's not what you want . . ." Paul asked, tentatively hopeful. But Lanny looked away.

"I already told you what I want," she said. And Paul, dropped to silence by her words, could only stare at the water's fragile skin, wait for her to throw another stone.

Instead, he heard the rustle and thud of stones falling in the grass.

"Come on," she said and took his hand again in hers and led him slowly onward, down once again, the narrow path.

THE PATH LEFT

the lakeshore and turned inland. It crossed the gravel highway at the crown of a hill and picked up again on the other side, rising steeply beneath a bower of needled branches.

Paul could feel her rising as he climbed. Secret circles turned like clockworks in the shadow; oracles cast in the scatter of moonlight on leaves. Her wordless language whispered in his brain. He stared after these visions, feeling always they would shimmer like magic writing in a fairy tale and resolve themselves.

They never did; they never had. They didn't now. He walked faster, forced his gaze down to the narrow strip of ground between his feet and pressed ahead. Then he came to a branch in the trail and stopped.

He'd let go of Lanny and she'd fallen behind but he could hear her progress on the trail from some distance below. He sat down on one of the mossy logs and took the needle case out of his pocket, turned it over and over in his lap while he waited.

A while later Lanny came into view. She stopped when she saw Paul, sighed and sat down on the log beside him.

The damp chill settled around them and their breath curled up in ribbons of vapor in the silver light. After a while Lanny asked:

"We gonna go soon?" He could feel her shivering beside him, teeth chattering between the words.

"Soon," he said, not looking up. He lay the needle case flat in his lap, snapped it open. Everything was there: syringe, ampoule bottle, short length of rubber tubing. Lanny didn't speak. Instead Paul felt her get to her feet, heard her walking around the small clearing. He listened to her footsteps pass close then move away, then stop.

"You know how to fix?" she asked.

"Yes," said Paul. He looked up. Lanny was standing at the edge of the clearing between the two forks. Her arms were folded across her chest; her face lost in shadow.

"You're really going to do it," she said.

Paul nodded. Hesitation, then to his surprise, her quiet question:

"Why?"

He blinked, stared at her. The question stopped him cold for a second; like an ice cold hand, implacable guardian in the dark: Why? So complicated, no way to explain or justify, no solid concrete reason he could name. He shook his head.

"Because," he said, shrugging helplessly. "I just can't stay."

"Shit," said Lanny, shaking her head. "You want me to go away?" Paul thought about it. He looked at the needle case, touched the hard, cold things inside, looked back at Lanny. And stumbling, halting:

"Do you—would you want to—be there?"

"Yeah," She turned and looked right at him. "Twisted, eh?"

Paul laughed, a brief hard exhalation.

"You're asking the wrong guy," he said. He snapped the needle case closed and stood.

"Just a little farther," he told Lanny and stepped over the edge of the trail and onto the fall that began below the mossy log.

LATER IT AMAZED PAUL

how easily the fabric of his life had come apart. No effort required and two, three months tops for everything to ravel down to strings and threads.

At first a simple withdrawal from the world. Easy enough to call

Continued on page 84

*The stars
themselves bow to
the power of the
Great Khan.*

*But where does
power lie in the
vastness of the
heavens?*

The Mongols Among STARS The

BY MARTHA BAYLESS
*Illustration by
Janet Aulisio*

AFTER WE HAD CONQUERED THE Tatars and the Tanguts, brought down Ning-hsia and Bukhara, and taken Samarkand and Khorasan, the glorious Chinggis Khan made ready to pillage the skies.

"Write me down," he said, "as the emperor who conquered everything the eyes can see, the lord of the Earth and the heavens." We were in the summer palace, and he was striding about the Room of Maps and Stars. It was spring, just after the Feast of the Red Disc, when the Moon is renewed, and we had only arrived at the summer palace the day before. The glorious Khan and his household always go east in the summer and west in the winter; his people regard him as the Sun itself—glorious, relentless—passing over the face of the land.

"Put my conquest in the histories and the chronicles," said Chinggis, fingering the astrolabe. "I wish an epic to be composed about our journey. Call it 'The Glorious Khan Among the Stars.' Will you do these things?"

"I will," I said. I am Tatatungo, chief secretary and scribe to the glorious Khan, and I record all his conquests on vellum and bind them in leather studded with amethysts.

"There are untold riches in the heavens," said the Khan, turning the silver moon. "Which we would expect, it being the realm of the Eternal Heaven, the realm of God. As I am the emperor on Earth, he is the emperor of the divine realms, and it is fitting that we should meet."

His silken robes rustled as he picked up the astrolabe. "In addition," he said, "the celestial riches have never been plundered, and I am the khan of plunder. I'll pick the stars like apples and melt

them down. I'll chip at the planets until they come apart like gems in my hand. The noise of my army will drown out the music of the spheres. Before I return I'll write my name on the sky. Note these things down."

"I will note them down," I said.

Kökochü, the holy man in the court of the glorious Khan, entered the room. He is a man who has been known to stand just outside doors, listening. He was dressed in a white tunic and a white robe, as befits a man of the spirits, but in his days as a warrior he had



slashed his cheeks repeatedly, as warriors do, to keep his beard from growing. The scars looked like writing on his face, and what they said looked like dog in the Uighur script.

"No one has ever been able to fly to the heavens," said Kóköchü.

"We're not going to fly," said the glorious Khan. "We're going to climb. I have the secret from my grandmother. It can be done with balls of thread. You will go with us, Kóköchü, to witness the first meeting of the two most glorious emperors, and to help us carry the loads of treasure. We will leave at first light tomorrow."

"It is not so simple," said Kóköchü, "to talk to God." He himself wore white always, to remain unstained, and rode a white horse and carried a white staff, and purified himself with fire daily, and arranged the shoulder bones of sheep with exceeding care, to receive word from the spirits and from God. If a man already knew the ways of the celestial world, it was Kóköchü.

In the morning the Khan assembled the Night Guards to accompany us. They wore black cloaks, black tunics with silver facings, and black velvet caps trimmed in monkey fur. Their horses were small and dark. Their tunics were quilted and they had cuirasses of leather; scimitars, longbows and quivers; and daggers strapped to their forearms. They had saved the glorious Khan's life in the middle of the night the previous summer, when he had been attacked by a troop pretending to represent the holy man Kóköchü. They were the hardest men in the world.

In addition to the Night Guards there was Tolui, the youngest son of the glorious Khan; Kóköchü, the man of the spirits; and me, chief chronicler and witness of history. We took many days' supply of dried meat and mare's milk, and traveled in a week's time to a hidden grove on the mountain of Udai, where no one could follow us. We built two bonfires from the wood of the mountain myrtle and passed between them to purify ourselves.

Then we hurled balls of blue and red thread up to the stars, and their tails came trailing down to earth again. We threw our cloaks over our cuirasses and drew on our quilted gloves and began to climb.

Our weapons clattered as we pulled ourselves up. The air was cold in the heights of the sky. We could see our breath. We climbed for the space of a day. The light faded until we were in a realm of inky blackness lit only by the small silver fires of the stars.

"We must be leagues above the Earth," said the chief of the Night Guards.

"Don't look down," ordered the glorious Khan.

The chief of the guards was already looking. His face was illuminated by the light from below, the light of the warm Earth with its blue sky and clear seas. "It's all so small," he said. "I can see rivers tracing their way through the countryside, and small collections of turrets and towers that must be cities, and armies on the march, small armies like ants streaming across battlefields."

"The Earth is large and full of dangers!" said Chinggis Khan. "Those armies are mine, and they've conquered half the world!"

"But everything is so small!" said the guard. His face had turned pale and sweat broke out on his forehead. "I feel dizzy," he said, and his hold on the thread slipped. He dropped beneath us, falling, silent. No one dared look down to see him fall.

We continued to climb until we reached the sphere that encloses the inner heavens. It was transparent like crystal, with gaps in its surface like pools. We pulled ourselves through the gaps, as though we were climbing out of water, and stood on the convex side of the

sphere. The stars were fixed in the sphere around us; below us was the blue-green orb of Earth, awash in a sea of night.

"I can see the land and the oceans," said Tolui, the youngest son of the glorious Khan. "But the land has no corners. I have always heard that the Earth has four corners."

"Those corners exist, but the Earth itself is imperfect," said Chinggis. "The land is only truly foursquare in the mind of God."

The guards spread out upon the landscape of the sphere. They muttered and wandered about, circling the stars embedded in the crystal. The voices carried in the stillness of the dark heavens. The stars were silvery, round, the size of a hand. Their light shimmered, but they had no true flame.

"We must be very near God here," said one of the archers.

"We should see him at any moment," said Chinggis Khan. "We have reached the eternal lands. The holy stories tell us that God dwells among the imperishable stars. He will step forth to greet me. We will soon be feeling his warmth, there is no doubt."

Several among us stopped to make the signs of reverence, though not the glorious Khan, who is a man without awe. He went to one of the stars and kicked at it with his rough-shod foot. It was dislodged from beneath us down to Earth, as quick as a stone dropping down a well, leaving a trail of glitter that hung in the air and then faded.

We stamped on the sphere with our heavy boots, but our feet made no sound. Our breath formed clouds around us.

"While we are waiting," said Chinggis, "let us gather the stars into sacks. Are they silver, or something even more precious?"

We went to the stars scattered around us, embedded in the surface of the sphere, and jiggled them out of their holes. They were light in the hand, lighter than cabbages. One of the guards plucked a star from the crystal and squeezed it in his fist. It disintegrated into a small cloud of shimmering dust.

"When they're taken out of their places," he said, "they're light as air."

"They're nothing," said Tolui. "They'll fetch nothing at the market, you can build nothing from them."

"Fly on the stars, then," said Chinggis. He prided another from its hole and, swinging his arm in a great arc, threw it at one of the guards. It flew in a trail of gleaming dust and spattered on the man's leather cuirass, leaving a bright dash of silver on his chest. We all scrambled to scoop up stars and throw them at each other. I dropped several before I got one in my hands. It was almost weightless. It shimmered and dazzled, I held it for a moment and then slipped it into the pocket in the seam of my cloak.

"Enough!" said Chinggis. "If the stars are worthless, we will pilage the Moon and the planets."

We could see the Moon, several leagues from us, floating in the heavens. We threw our cloaks back over our shoulders and started toward the Moon. As we made our way we passed planets to the sides of our trail. They were as large as ponies, flaming with a red and silver light. The air was cold and still. The Moon was a great distance, but when we got there we felt as if we had just set out. There seemed to be no time up in the heavens. Far off we could hear the faintest tone, several tones, in various harmonies, wheeling past each other.

"Is there someone up here?" cried Chinggis.

"It's the music of the spheres," said Kóköchü. "It can only be heard in the empty places."

"I am surprised," said Chinggis, "that God allows a place to be so empty."

The rounded top half of the Moon, the color of mare's milk, bumped against the sphere we were standing on like a swimmer under ice. It had no light of its own; its underside glowed, but it was dark above. The guards unstrapped their daggers, knelt down, and chipped through the sphere. Its surface was not cold, but when we held the chips in our hands they dwindled gradually away like ice.

When the guards had made a hole we clambered down until we were all standing on the Moon. Its substance was like chalk.

"I want to ride it to Earth," said Chinggis. "Kököchü, tell us how to release it from its moorings."

"It is not moored," said Kököchü. "It dwells in the sky. You'd have to pull it out, as you pull a fish from water."

"I have no hook," said Chinggis, "and no rope. I'll leave the Moon here. Lovers will thank me." He turned to me. "Write me down," he said, "as the man who chose to leave the Moon in the sky."

With his sword the emperor wrote CHINGGIS KHAN in the moon dust. "It's too small to read from Earth," he said. "I hadn't anticipated that. And it's on the wrong side. But if any other conqueror ascends to the stars, he'll find my name already written here. That is something. Let us depart."

As we climbed back off the Moon, I was the only one to notice that the guards tramped, unthinkingly, the name of the glorious Khan.

"Let us conquer the planets," said the glorious Khan. We made our way back across the skies toward a large planet burning with a reddish flame. When we arrived at it, we found it was scarcely warm, the heat no more than the heat of a small brazier on a winter night. Chinggis stirred the flames with his sword and knocked a chunk of the planet, the size of a fist, into the ether below us. It sank to Earth, a fiery tail streaming behind it.

"The planets are nothing but lumps of coal!" said Chinggis Khan.

"I notice," said Kököchü, turning a face to Chinggis Khan, "that God has not yet come forward to greet you."

"It may be," said Chinggis, "that he is afraid of the glorious Khan."

"It may be," said Kököchü, a smile twisting the scars on his face, "that he is immortal."

"What does that mean?" said Chinggis. "You are using words to confound me; I will have none of these words. I have risen to power because the lord of the divine realms perceived me to be his like. It may be that now I have overshadowed him and that he is afraid. This has happened before in great dynasties."

"Listen," said Kököchü. There was a silence in the swimming blackness; all we could hear was the faint creak of the heavens. When I looked down through the crystal sphere I perceived that we were moving, very slowly, across the silent and empty skies.

"Do you hear anyone say your name?" said Kököchü. "Chinggis Khan! Do you hear anyone respond to your name in all the divine realms?"

"You're a heretic," cried the glorious Khan, and he drew his curved sword from its scabbard.

"I'm speaking nothing but the truth," said Kököchü, taking a step backward.

"You are not speaking my truth," said the glorious Khan. "Alaqi Jebel!" Guards moved in on either side of Kököchü and held his arms. He struggled in their grasp, his face distorted into a sneer.

"You tell lies!" said Chinggis. He drew the sword from his scabbard and pressed it into the stomach of the holy man until his white robes were suffused with blood the color of rubies. Kököchü struggled against the guards. "There is no emperor in the heavens!" he said. Then the glorious Khan gutted the holy man and dropped his warm and stinking entrails down toward the Earth below. Finally, he carved on Kököchü's chest a sign of irreverence. It looked like the word *empty* in the Uighur script, except that the Khan does not know the Uighur script.

"Somebody carry him down," said Chinggis. "He slandered my honor, and therefore God removed his divine protection from him and took away his life. Is that not the implication? If God disapproved, he would have stepped forward to speak to me. I will have

no one put forth the lie that God is not here and that he has not approved me as the ruler of the earthly kingdom!"

The guards wrapped Kököchü's white robe around him as a shroud, and one of them hitched him over his shoulder.

"Well, fie on the heavens entirely," said Chinggis Khan. "I declare them all mine, but they're nothing but rubble. Let us descend."

We backtracked to the balls of blue and red thread, still caught and looped around the stars in their sockets. As we descended, one of the guards looked down.

"Earth is so small!" he cried. "It's nothing more than a piece of rubble itself!" He grew dizzy and lost his hold, and slipped into the void beneath us.

"Earth a piece of rubble?" said the glorious Khan. "Nonsense. The Earth at least is a jewel, and I own it."

It took us half a day to climb down to Mongolia. When we had marched down from the mountain of Uday and back to the summer palace, we found it crowded with messengers and diplomats bearing news of an uprising in the principate of Termez. The glorious Khan is a merciful lord, but on this occasion he ordered the insurrection put down ruthlessly. Thus began the migration of Transoxiana, in which over a million people fled.

"I will be lord over Termez, at least," said Chinggis Khan.

Then he retired to the inner chambers, where his servants came to help him take off his armor. When they had left he turned to me.

"I am the first emperor since the creation to visit the heavens," said the glorious Khan, "and therefore I am second only to God. In fact, I am wondering whether God truly has more power than I have. I did not see any signs of it in the heavens. It may be that I am equal to God. And yet for some reason it makes me melancholy."

"Would you like me to bring you the astrolabe," I asked, "so you can point out its errors to the scholars?"

"Kököchü was my only scholar," he said, "and I have sent him away to rot on an ash heap. Scholars think too much. God was all around us up there; there was no room for anything else; that's why it seemed so empty. There's so much space that opposites stretch into each other. I think that's what Kököchü meant by God being immaterial, wouldn't you think?"

I only know what I see, so I had no answer for the glorious Khan.

"But as far as conquest goes, the skies are a disappointment," he continued. "They are not worthy of my glory. And it appears that the Earth, too, is not as large or as grand as it should be. I sought to conquer everything there is, and there is nothing but rubble to conquer."

"But there is one consolation," he said. "If I cannot conquer the universe, I will conquer time. Write an epic about my journey to the skies. I want it to be recited down the generations. Write that I conquered all the heavens, valiant and alone, and that I took the stars from God's hand, and stood atop creation."

"You will write it that way, won't you?" asked the glorious Khan.

"I will compose it just as you say," I answered.

"Good," he said, and his face brightened. "Good."

That evening I began to compose the epic. I called it *The Glorious Khan Among the Stars*. In the epic the skies are warm, suffused with light and encrusted with jewels. God dwells in them, and he has written the name of the glorious Khan across the heavens in a way too mysterious for our earthly eyes to see. I composed the epic on calfskin vellum in the Room of Maps and Stars. It waits in a chest of mountain myrtle, near the astrolabe, to be recited on the Feast of the Glorious Conquest of the Skies.

Then I wrote down the true story, the secret history, of our visit to the stars, because every lie must have a counterbalance of the truth. I put us all in it, as we were, because it was not just the glorious Khan who walked the emptiness of the heavens. I wrote the story in my rice-paper commonplace book, at my desk, by the dim and shimmering light of the star I saved in my pocket. This is the secret history I have written.

Neither account tells the way to the heavens. Nevertheless the tails of the blue and red threads still hang in a grove on the mountain of Uday, for those who have a mind to climb. *

MY NAME IS VICTOR DiLorenzo and I've been a Hollywood agent for too long now, a vampire for maybe half that. I first got what we say in my biz, *the call*, way back when, from a Lucille Ball look-alike desperate for companionship. Once bitten I was smitten, which worked out okay. I was never much of a morning person.

Lucy and me had a rocky relationship that got worse as she went over. Going over—that's an expression vamps use when somebody loses it, when they give up on the life. The blood, the never-ending hunger, the secrecy takes its toll, and don't let anyone tell you different. Lucy went over, bailed out almost 10 years ago, looked into the sun. I've been alone ever since.

So no one was more surprised than me to learn that things don't have to be that way, that I'm still capable of love. Last night, I'm working the night shift at LAX. I'm starving 'cause I ain't eaten too good for a week or so, walking through the concourse wishing there was blood takeout. My feet are pounding a drum roll on the blue pavement (as I think of the carpet). I'm checking all around for vamps or other agents on the troll when I see the girl deplane. Too young for me, not that age matters worth bean sprouts when you live forever. Taller by a hand, nice body, good hair—just the wrong color. Deep-set brown eyes with painted-on lashes that remind me of Twiggy. The look of someone vulnerable yet fully capable of knocking down a sorry old fool like me.

I do maybe 90 percent of my recruiting at the airport, have a pretty good system for picking up clients. They gotta have the look or I can't do nothing with them. Attractive enough to thumb their noses at low-budget porn offers but not so beautiful or talented as to

stand a real chance in the industry. Secure in their abilities, yet realistic. It helps if they got an IQ above seaweed. I don't like taking unfair advantage of anybody. After all, I got my scruples. Likely, because of my blood habit. I also got someone else's.

So, this girl hoists her carry-on bag to her chest—that suitcase-armor thing so many females do—stops walking and looks all around her like she don't believe she's finally here.

Some guy coming up behind her has his mug behind a *Wall Street Journal* and bumps into her. "Good place to stop, asshole," he growls, but she don't seem to notice or care.

I know exactly how she's feeling. She's left her hometown and everything she's ever known, been in airports or on planes all day. She's tired; her back aches and she's long past feeling excited about her future.

It's been a while, but I remember that final descent into LA, how the plane drops through the layer of smog engulfing the San Gabriel Mountains, how that smog looks like clouds on fire, how you're thinking: Here I am—the hole where Heaven meets Hell.

Here's the funny thing: Once you land, you stop noticing the smog. You look up and realize all you can see of those dark clouds are memories. Which should be a warning.

This girl looks appropriately scared, but brave. She's got that real look to her, something that's hard to fake. I'm positive I can get her into a sanitary napkin commercial or two, and if I'm lucky, maybe hand cream, enough to keep her hoping that big success is just around the corner.

I take a step toward her in time to see Helmut, my main competition, is gonna get there first. My fault for not paying closer attention. Helmut isn't a vamp, but he's a bloodsucker nevertheless. He finds lowest of the low: I hate his guts and not only because he makes more than I do. I hate him because he reminds me that we both use people to make a living.

My only hope is that this girl hates Germans, addicted to speed, oily blonds with tan leather jack-

OH, SWEET MYSTERIES OF LIFE—
AND DEATH—
AND UNDEATH—
AT LAST HE'S
FOUND YOU

BY LESLIE WHAT • ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN HAPLEY

GOING VAMPIRE



ZD

I HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO DO RASPUTIN-EYES RIGHT THERE AND THEN...

ets the same color as their skin. My only hope is that she's got no father figure in her life and has been looking for a guy with a free-way of experience lining his face.

The Kraut reaches in his pocket to pull out his Helmut Schmidt, Talent Scout card.

Too late, I get mine ready.

Newbies to Hollywood have watched enough movies to know better, but almost every one of them is naive in at least one respect: If you got no credentials and no contacts, yet still manage to land an agent, it's a safe bet that the agent is either praying for you or preying on you.

Bad agents count on trust and ignorance to make their living, at least I do. Because there's nothing worse than wasting your time lining up a mark only to lose her to an overdose of reality. Well, there's one thing worse; this girl was about to teach me that.

So, anyway, Helmut is two steps away from caging the birdie, when—from out of nowhere—some deaf guy peddling sign-language instruction pamphlets, intercepts. The deaf guy hands my girl an envelope and does some fancy hand-job even I can translate as, "Give me all your money."

She looks at him like she knows he's not on the level, but there's gotta be something wrong with an otherwise healthy adult or he wouldn't be doing this crap for a living. She reaches into her jeans pocket and pulls out a fiver.

And that's when I know that this girl is different, that she looks at the world with the wisdom of someone who realizes she is just passing through. Sophistication like that can be worth plenty in my business. Maybe sanitary pads is thinking too low. Maybe she's gonna be breakfast cereal or even headache pills. I can't wait to sign her.

Once I sign a client, I arrange for dental work and small cosmetic improvements that don't set me back too much. Once I sign a client, she's mine for life. Then it's 25 percent plus. The 25 percent covers expenses but the plus is what keeps me alive.

For this girl, I'm ready to deal.

I have no choice but to do Rasputin-eyes right there and then. This is something I don't like to show too much of, except for emergencies. If someone—not in my line of vision—was to see me, they might get suspicious. As I am here most every night, suspicion I can't afford. I prefer blending in. No limelight for me, not my style.

But now I gotta show some tricks or I'll lose her. I make my mind go solid, then send out a mental Valentine just for her.

The girl looks my way, only for a second, but that's all it takes.

I give her Eyes. It's an offer she cannot refuse, and I mean really.

Without so much as a glance toward Helmut, she shows her teeth, in a friendly way, and heads toward me.

She's close enough I can smell her. She puts down her carry-on and I'm in heaven cause it looks like she's gonna hug me. "Oh," she says, stepping back. "Sorry. For a second I thought I knew you."

"You do," I tell her. I grasp her hand and give it a firm shake. Her skin is warm, supple. I pick up her carry-on. "I'm your new best friend."

I introduce myself and learn her name is Kyla.

Meanwhile, that Teutonic tarantula is watching my every move. He runs his fingers through his hair and does a bad-Elvis grin. Before I know it, he's all over me, patting my shoulder, squeezing my hand. He ogles my girl with two of his eyes.

I feed him to alligators, but that would be cruelty to animals.

"You look familiar," he tells Kyla. "Are you a model?"

The guy's so slick he could slide backward out of a boa with a bad case of hemorrhoids.

Kyla stares at him, then glances downward. Her cheeks glow pink. She's smart enough to see he's pulling her leg, no doubt it embarrasses her that she's flattered anyway.

She's hungry for attention; that's why she came here. I plan to give her what she needs and more.

"I'd like to be a model," she says, "but I'm not tall enough."

He smiles, thrusts his card at her. "Kismet," he says. "My business is finding models. And you're plenty tall. Maybe not for runway, but certainly for ads. Perhaps movies."

This is where it gets tricky. I like to stay clear of Helmut. He's more of a hustler than I wanna be, so I'll usually give up a mark to avoid a fight.

Not tonight. This girl has made me feel young again.

Better late than never I give her my card. She likes me more than him. I don't kid myself—it's the Rasputin-eyes. "Don't sign anything," I tell her, "until you check with a lawyer about the contract."

"I can't afford a lawyer," she says.

"I can," I say. "I'll pick up the tab."

Helmut's mouth hangs open like a steamed clamshell. "It's his contract you should beware of," he hisses.

"Not a problem," I say. "You pick any lawyer in the phone book. I'll let him draw up a contract."

"You want her that bad, you can keep her," says Helmut.

I am glad that he's in such a generous mood and I can call it a night earlier than usual. I'm hungrier than I should be and afraid that if I don't get a snack I might lose control.

Kyla slips a slender arm beneath mine. "Thanks," she says. "There was something about him I didn't trust—can't say exactly why."

We head toward baggage claim.

My sixth sense lets me feel Helmut's eyes on my back.

 HERE'S A FAIR NUMBER OF VAMP-OWNED BUSINESSES IN Los Angeles; one is based right here at the airport. A friend started the Night Rider Cab Company. He's got 10 drivers working for him now, all good people. Most of them were rescued from the streets, rescued just in time to keep them from going over.

"Evening, Vic," says the youngster, Rudy. He'll be 21 for the rest of his days, but he's smart enough not to rub that in. He opens the door and I help Kyla inside, then step around to the other door to let myself in.

Rudy hoists her bags into the trunk and asks, "Where to?"

Before I have a chance to tell him, Kyla blurts out, "Please! Could we drive by Hollywood Boulevard? I know this is silly and it's just concrete, but I've always wanted to see the sidewalk stars."

"Your nickel," says Rudy. By this time I'm famished, not up to sightseeing before dinner. Kyla's looking more delectable by the minute, though I have always drawn the line at snacking on a girl before she's signed. It's poor form.

"Sure," I say. "We'll see the sights, but we gotta stop at the club first. I need to eat."

"The club?" says Kyla.

Rudy tips his hat. "We're on our way."

The club is owned by a blood brother named Barry. He books his talent through me, buys supplies from a vamp food broker at American Grocer. Uses Night Rider for all his transportation needs. Runs a vamp homeless shelter during the day. No matter what you think of us, we've got the networking thing down pat.

Kyla says, "This is all too unbelievable, Victor," and sidles up close enough that I can smell her heart beating beneath a layer of jasmine cologne.

Looks like I went a little heavy on the Rasputin-eyes. Frankly, she's driving me crazy.

"I know the competition is tough," she says, "and I don't have much of a chance, but I've always wanted to be in movies. And not just to be a star or because of the money. I think I could be really good. Make a difference in how people see things."

So she wants to be an artist. I respect that. "You do theater in your home town?" I ask.

"A little. High school plays. I played Golda in *Fiddler on the Roof*."

"You? Golda? I'd have cast you as one of the daughters."

"Looks can be deceiving," she says. "I'm a lot older on the inside."

"Me too," I say.

She makes me feel I could say anything, be totally honest about myself without losing her. Not that I am honest with her—I just feel like I could be if I wanted.

We talk and talk and talk; in 15 minutes it's like I've known her all my life. I wouldn't mind spending more time with her. Been a while since I felt this way. A long while. I put my arm around her shoulder and give her a friendly hug.

She nuzzles her face into my shoulder, says, "I'm not as naive as you might think. I understand that nobody ever does something for nothing."

Her hand rests just above my knee.

"But I want you to know," she says, "that I would sleep with you anyway. You're very attractive," she says. "And funny. That's a rare combination, don't you think?"

Either she's a better actress than I gave her credit for or she means it. If I get a vote, I'd say she means it.

"I'll admit," she says, "that I might not have picked you out of a crowd. Your being a talent agent got my attention. But that's not the only reason why I'm interested in you. I like you. I want you to know that."

I sit there, the tension growing unbearable and for all the wrong reasons. I figure she's still under the influence of Rasputin-eyes; for some reason, that bugs me.

She takes my hand in hers. "About sex," she says. "Don't worry. I won't have regrets. It's okay if that's what you want from me; the feeling is mutual."

"That's not what I want," I tell her. I want something from her, all right, but what I want goes much deeper than sex.

Still, her touch, the fragrance of her blood, the warmth of her leg pressing against mine—it drives me to distraction. I can't take much more.

Contract be damned, I lean over; her scent fills the inside of me. I cup one breast in my hand, thinking of how delicious she will taste, how satisfied I'll feel after. In the back of my mind, a ghostly fear lingers that I'm hungry enough I'll take too much, drain her

Continued on page 96

OLD TIMES

*Admit it—you
have this same*

*daydream on
the way down*

the boarding

tunnel...

BY JAMES SALLIS

THE MAN IN front of you in line says, "I don't suppose you could tell me if a crash is scheduled?"

You turn to shrug apologetically, impotently, at those behind you in line. Some harsh faces there. You quickly turn back.

He's 30-ish, well dressed in a middle-America sort of way, crumpled brown slacks and sport coat, crisp white shirt with yellow knit tie, hair a close-clipped tangle of curls. There's a newspaper folded in one side coat pocket. An oversized flight bag lies crumpled on its side like a discarded boot beside him.

Smiling, the ticket clerk looks up and says, "You know I can't give out that information. Sorry, Paul." It's quite a smile, something she has a talent for.

New statistics scroll onto the board above her head.

**FLIGHT INTERRUPTIONS
DOWN BY 28 PERCENT
FATALITIES TO DATE THIS
MONTH... 923
LOWEST FARES—ALL
FOR YOU**

He glances briefly about, aware at last of the growing disinterest behind him.

"Hey, it's me, Gladys. The guy who taught you how to overbook, take double breaks—all the important stuff."

Her smile never wavers.

"I remember you, Paul."

"We used to be like that."

"Before you went to a competitor."

Gladys. Western offered me almost twice the money, better hours, perks. What else could I do? What would you have done?

Above her head, with the rest of the board remaining the same, FATALITIES shifts unremarked to 1,180.

"If anyone understands, it has to be you. I'd have been right here punching buttons the rest of my life. With Western at least I had a chance to get out—thought I had, anyway."

"It didn't work out for you, then?"

"No, No, I'm sorry to say it didn't, not this time. But I'm on my way to an interview in Chicago, and this one, I've got a good feeling about."

She hands the envelope, tickets tucked safely away inside, boarding pass stapled to the outside, across the counter.

"Thank you for flying Allied," she says. "Next, please."

The man turns fleetingly and smiles at you, at this potential mob back there. Rip his heart out. So hard to get a break in this world. He turns back.

"Gladys," he says, "please. I haven't worked in almost a year. Now—finally—I have an

interview. And I have a chance. But I need your help. For the old times?"

She looks at him, then down at her VDT. Walks fingers over her keyboard as FATALITIES blinks away at 1,180. She looks over the rabbit she's pulled out of this electronic hat.

"You're confirmed straight through to Chicago, Mr. Paulson."

Thanking her, he reaches for her hand but she doesn't extend it. His own hovers there by the stack of luggage labels and credit card applications. Finally he withdraws it.

"I won't forget this," he says. "I owe you, Gladys."

He shrugs into his oversized shoulder bag and starts off toward the gate. There is a milling already at its mouth. We could all still make it.

"Friend of yours?" the ticket agent next to Gladys asks.

"Sort of. Paul trained me. I had a crush on him like you wouldn't believe but he never noticed me. I cried for weeks."

"Before that competitor got him."

"Yeah." She laughs. "The competitor. A blonde. Of course, we were all a lot younger then."

"Some things stay with you."

"Some things do."

She turns back and says, "Can I help you, sir?"

You hold out your ticket, but for a moment she goes on staring into space, a tight smile on her lips, and doesn't reach for it. You wonder if you really want to go to Chicago today. *

T

O TALK ABOUT DOUG
Beekman's art with any
degree of authority, I have to
talk about character.

I can tell you he's a superb
craftsman, a devoted follower of the Pyle school
of American illustration, that he's as dedicated

A Personal
and Highly
Subjective
Encomium to
the Art of
Douglas
Beekman

and meticulous with his
pulp-style illustrations
as he is with his high
fantasy and big-ticket
SF; I can tell you he's
the only illustrator to
win three (!) Spectrum
awards. I can go on into
more esoteric realms—

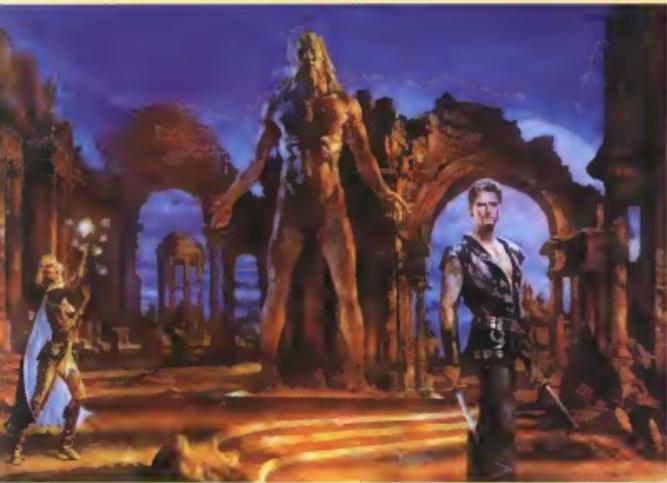


THE WIZARD OF CHARACTER

A dark, atmospheric illustration depicting a scene of combat. In the foreground, several skeletal, undead warriors are engaged in battle with a lone warrior who is partially visible on the left. The setting is a ruined, overgrown city with collapsed structures and debris. The lighting is dramatic, with bright highlights on the bones and the warrior's armor against a dark, cloudy sky.

The undead die again at a
warrior's hand in *Conan &*
the Grim Grey God.

BY MATTHEW WOODRING STOVER



*Above: Beekman creates three distinct stages of action for Matthew Woodring Stover's novel *Heroes Die*. Right: An awe-inspiring vista graces the cover of Red Orc's *Rage by Philip José Farmer*.*

but to draw out the ties between his work and Van Dyck's portraiture, to speak of his use of Turner-like atmospherics, his Rembrandtesque control of line, of light and shadow, is to say almost nothing at all; if you know fine art, you can see these elements for yourself. If you don't know fine art, these names are just babbles that makes me sound educated.

THERE ARE FINE POINTS OF composition that I can go on about—the gestural echoes between the figure, the sand-worm, and the background cliffs in *Dune: The Worm Turns*, the intersecting arcs of departing spirits and the figure's cloak, played against the hard edges of mausoleum and sarcophagus in the bravura *Well of Souls*—not to mention the carefully chosen palette that defines and focuses the emotional impact of each image; but I'd rather leave those behind with just a polite mention, and skip ahead into what I really care about.

Character.

We writers spend a lot of words on "character." This is a luxury that we grant ourselves to throw words at a name until that name starts to feel like a person. When Douglas Beekman, on the other hand, sets out to build a character, he has only some curved lines and a few colors to work with, and he has to use those to make a person out of a blank white expanse of canvas or linen or paper.

How in God's name do you pull off that trick?

It must be some kind of magic.

In the dictionary, they'll tell you that character is "the aggregate of features and traits that form the apparent individual nature of

some person or thing." "Individual nature" is the key phrase here, because that's exactly what you see in Doug Beekman's art. You can see it in every piece in his gallery, but I want you to look closely at three in particular.

Let's start with *A Killing Thirst* (1985), one of Doug's best-known (and most widely imitated) images. Skip the qualities of composition, the way the arcs of light and shadow draw your focus toward the figure's eyes; forget the symbolic commentary, the literary way he bends reality to put the reflection of a monster in the pool, where we should rea-



sonably expect to see the figure once again. For just one minute, ignore the sizzle of dramatic tension here, and just ask yourself this question: *Who is this guy?*

You know him, don't you?

I know him. I've known him for years. His is not some generic overmuscled fantasy barbarian—and he sure as hell isn't Arnold Schwarzenegger in a loincloth. This is the beast of prey in the shape of a man, the stone killer born and bred in the Cimmerian wastes who clawed his bloody way up to the throne of Aquilonia. I started reading Robert

E. Howard when I was about 12 years old; if you haven't read the originals, I guess you'll have to take my word for it.

If you have read them, you know: This is the real deal.

Maybe you're not so impressed, yet; maybe you think, "Oh, yeah, sure, easy enough to do with Conan; he's only the single most famous character in the history of fantasy fiction."

Maybe you should have a look at *Bookwyrm* (1996).

This little dragon absorbed in his reading

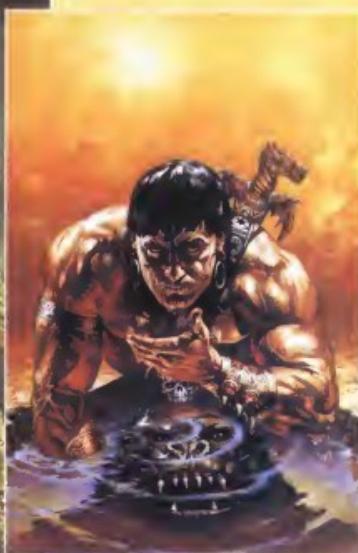




Above: Dune: The Worm Turns. **Center, left:** The reflection of a warrior's true self in a killing thirst.

is as individual as your kid brother; in another painting, another pose, you'd know him the instant you saw him. Beekman's control of the language of gesture is so refined that it's difficult to talk about this guy merely as an image; he becomes a living, breathing personality before your very eyes. If you squint a little, concentrate, you can even hear his voice thin, kinda dry, perhaps overly precise, sometimes taking on a slightly reedy librarian's enthusiasm for obscure distinctions of arcane lore.

If this particular dragon should have occasion to eat your head, you may be assured that he would do so with pinkie properly raised.



ND IN BOOKWYRM YOU can see an added element of Doug's overriding concern with character. He's taken this individual and put him somewhere specific. Not just some misty undefined office, or library-type place, but a bedroom, obviously his bedroom; a place where every element of the environment becomes a comment, an enhancement, from the satin sheets on the fourposter bed to the very color of the light. He has carefully constructed his work of art around a single affect: the feel of this creature's personality. The interplay of environment and character in Beekman's work brings me to what is (pardonably, I think) my personal favorite among his works: the painting he did for the cover of my novel *Heroes Die* (1998).

His approach to cover art is a little different from how he handles his other paintings. This is an intensely technical kind of illustration, constrained by the necessities of cover copy, title, imprint logo, and UPC barcode. Almost like a theatrical designer, he composes his book covers in three "performance spaces," as



opposed to a single image. The primary space is the front cover, the eye-catching first impression of the book; secondary (and complementary) is the back cover. He uses the spine of the book as the third performance space, and with it he ties the primary and secondary spaces together into a coherent whole.

As a novelist, I'm acutely aware that your first and often most powerful impression of a character is how he looks on the cover. That's an impression that some readers never get over; if it's wrong, I'm screwed.

If it's right, though...

Look hard at the central figure of the primary performance space. That's Caine. You might not know him yet, but you can start to get a pretty damned good idea of who he is just by paying close attention to what's going on in the cover.

THE SETTING IS ALL ARCHWAYS, PORTALS WITH THUNDERHEADS GATHERING BEHIND, because this is all about duality: The setting is a place of transition from the foreground calm to the approaching storm that reflects not only the dual worlds of the novel, but the dual nature of Caine. The arches are crumbling—as are the walls that Caine tried to build between who he is and what he does.

From his battered black leathers and the knives in his hands to the balance of his stance and the look on his face, it's all there: not just danger—not just bloodlust and lethal fury held in check behind an expressionless mask—but also a certain reserve of self-

awareness... a quality of performance.

And that, in the end, might be the most extraordinary aspect of this painting. You look deep enough, and you can see the truth: He's a performer. An entertainer. A star.

An action hero in a kind of entertainment where even the extras are real people who really die.

How in hell does Beekman pull it off? What does he use as a model for that kind of image? How does he come to understand what that kind of man must look like?

How do you transform a blank white rectangle into a person?

There's only one real answer.

It's some kind of magic, I guess. ■

Above: Beekman combines the hard edges of tombs and the soft shadows of departing souls to create the ethereal mood in *Well of Souls*.
Center, right: A dragon at leisure in Bookwyrm.

in sick, play the invalid. Easy because it was clearly true—mycosis rampant: fevered, chilled, face gray with unremitting nausea; eyes shadowed with fatigue. Just flu, he'd said to one and all—forestry department secretary, his mother worried on the phone. Milou.

Milou was never fooled.

"*S'est pire,*" she said. *It's worse* and to pacify her, doctor's appointment made then secretly canceled.

"I'm fine," he said, again and again. "I'll be fine." And off she went—what else to do? reluctantly to work, to gym, to shop for tidbits he might eat—vegetable broth and ginger ale and crackers—all of which he vomited up or set aside apologetically, crawled back into bed, feigned sleep.

But as soon as he was alone, quick rising thrill inside his chest, quick thunder of the tub, and throwing off robe and shorts to sink into water and wait to be suffused with *her*. With *with-ness*. Two sets of thoughts; distinct but sliding alongside one another shedding sparks. He let her stir up what she would of him—thoughts, feelings. Rising without cause to anger, laughter, giddy delight at some forgotten pleasure.

And better still, he learned to know her too. Learned to sense that serene embracing of the world as *her*, calm center, gentle probing touch and knowing everything at once: earth, water, forest, moss—their tiny little tub—all of it in the now, ticking forward without time. Such a different way to know: wordless, without memory or speculation but such breadth of vision on each single moment's plane—the hum of root to root beneath the Earth, the tiny glittering minds of ants and beetles; slow turn of worms; sleepy glide of torpid fish and more and more ...

And every now and then too much more, too fast. Her conception of the world would overwhelm him suddenly and Paul would flail to feel the edges of himself dissolve, his borders suddenly expanding to contain all she contained. And flailing he would lose the thread, withdraw, and pull away to self and solace. Huddling then inside himself with wordless, nameless fear but always she would come to him again—gentle nudge against his thoughts, soothing mother touch and he would melt to her, sweet fall back to bliss, safe in her embrace and eager once again to tour the unknown world; a diver piggybacking on a tolerant whale. Sightseer in the infinite. And never alone and always *with* until faint, sweet withdrawal for them both, post-coital glow and surfacing to the world to find the day gone by, the water cold, himself wrinkled as a baby and dizzy with fatigue. And there, quiet rustling beyond the bathroom door, Milou.

Always Milou. Patient at first—a new side of her, so gentle with him that it shamed Paul to have evoked it with a lie. Milou beside him in the bed at night, not touching out of deference to his newly painful skin, his sudden chills and sweats and he knew that he should let her take his hand at least, let her whisper in his ear that she loved him still despite the widening gulf she didn't understand.

But instead he offered her nothing—no truth, no comfort—afraid to let her even that close for fear that she might feel it on his skin, smell the taint of what now lived inside him. A fungus among us—bitter joke he didn't dare reveal. Cold chill to think of how it would seem to her, to anyone—what he'd done, what he'd let himself become. Which was ... ? Too hard to think of it and so, feign sleep and wait to be alone because with *her* there were no questions and no doubts.

And Milou still pursuing answers. If he wasn't ill, he must be mad, depressed, delayed reaction to the miscarriage and wouldn't he please, please talk to someone. Please. But no, he wouldn't talk because he was fine. Fine. And patience worn by bland rebuff to the bare bones of fear and frustration underneath; gentle prodding deflected ignited into anger, confrontation at the bathroom door.

"What do you do in there all day?" she shrilled at him one afternoon. "Are you like a teenage boy?" Crude masturbating gesture, words thrown like mudballs, to hurt, to stain. And then, suddenly, Milou was crumbling before him—tears like he'd never seen before, a torrent of French—too fast and choked for Paul, still hazy from the afternoon's descent to follow. Still the meaning was crystal-clear: Milou's heart broken, their life together shattered and didn't he ... didn't he care?

Didn't he care at all?

And didn't he? Standing there, dumbstruck, one hand on the doorknob, he didn't know. It wasn't that he thought what was happening was right, or that Milou was wrong.

Someone should love her, he remembered thinking—remembered truly meaning it in his heart. *Someone* should comfort her and love her.

It should, he knew distantly, be him. But he made no move. Only watched as Milou turned—sobs choked to anguished silence; fists clenched across her heart—and fled down the hall to her office; only watched as the door slammed shut behind.

After that slow spiral to the end. Longer and longer sessions in the tub. Sicker and sicker in the waking world, he'd drag himself from the bathroom through rooms gray with twilight, gray with dawn to wolf down something from the fridge, nothing tasting right, smelling right. Then back to bed, or after a while, easier, to the couch, to fall asleep with the TV whispering, turned down to nothing for the company of the flicker.

Milou like a ghost refusing to fade. While everything else dissipated she condensed, localized—her presence nowhere in the apartment but where she was so that he always came upon her unexpectedly. A tall, thin iron piling waiting in the dark.

When he thought about those last weeks later he remembered her mostly fallen silent, watchful: standing in the doorway of the living room watching him pretend to read the paper or glancing up from her table at the sound of him padding barefoot down the hall.

She never asked again what he did in there but he supposed she listened; supposed she searched his things looking for reasons—for drugs, for child pornography, for things to make it all make sense. Or maybe not.

Emerging from his water womb at the tail end of one long night, head still reeling from his latest fall through brittle layers of wordless grace, he found her sitting on the sofa in the dark—a bag beside her, sweater over her arm.

"Are you leaving?" Paul had asked finally, voice croaking, froggy with disuse.

"No," said Milou. "You go." Her voice was quiet, level. He couldn't see her face, just her eyes glittering in the darkness. A million miles away across the worn Indian rug; distant but not quite gone. Paul swallowed, cleared his throat to speak and felt the slow, lazy turn of *her* somewhere deep inside.

"Okay," he said. And that, finally, was that.

HE PULLED HIMSELF TOGETHER

then. Enough to sell the jeep for cash, pack a few things in a bag, find himself a room at

the Hotel America Girls Girls in the downtown east side.

Not as cheap as he should have gone—the room tiny, airless, smelling of cabbage and the deep rich reek of pouch tobacco, but with the necessary luxury of a private bathroom and a tub. A dismal place but he barely glanced around as he took possession, locked the door, tossed the key and daypack on the bed, pulling off clothing as he went.

The tub was small—turquoise enamel gray with age and dirt. Silverfish scuttled out of the drain when he turned the water on and he let them wash away before he jammed the too-big rubber plug into the rusty hole. He would need to buy a new plug, he thought vaguely as yellow water gushed from the washerless faucet. Something to scrub the tub to get it clean but later, later ... All of that could wait. Already he could feel the heavy turning in his gut and it seemed to him then, as he stepped naked into the slippery, gritty water, that he never had any plan beyond this moment. No destination beyond this place. Had never wanted to be anywhere but here.

THE FEEL SEEMED LARGER

now than it had been then. Paul and Lanny climbed down the slope to a flat mossy area surrounded by stones. The hummocks and fallen trees were mostly submerged. Paul could smell the strong green smell of the water as their feet squelched through the mossy carpet.

It was cold here, bright where the moonlight rayed down into the clearing. He couldn't pick the exact place out from the rest but it didn't matter. This was the place; soon, soon would come the time.

He could feel it, feel her rising in his blood like wine as he descended the fall. Sensed the clicking, turning, interlocking patterns abruptly slow and tumble into synch. He stood, stared, waited. Distantly he could hear a sound and blinked to find the girl—Lanny—hands on his shoulders, looking into his face.

"You gone, Johnny?" she asked softly, then, frowning. "Paul?"—first time she'd used his name and it sounded as strange to him as birdcalls. She was looking at him oddly; her expression unreadable—what was it that she saw? The patterns all around them, moving now in unison, slow rotation around this single point. This place, this time.

Now.

But facing Lanny, her face just below his eye level, he found himself hesitating, shaking his head, wanting—needing—to say something and having nothing, no words at all, to say what was in his heart. Lanny, looking worried, but still there.

Paul's hand swung helplessly against her hand and her fingers curled around his, squeezed. Her other hand wrapped around his neck drew his head against her shoulder.

"It's okay," she whispered. "It's okay—listen"

And she began to speak, her voice calm and low but in words he didn't know, a language he had never heard before—full of glottal sounds and chanting rhythm. Native tongue and yet the meaning was clear, the touch of her fingers drawing lines of fire down the back of his neck that moved, whether she knew it or not, with the turning patterns of the world. That spoke with the silent voice of the forest.

He took a deep breath that sounded like a sob and she whispered again. "It's okay"

"Okay," he said after a while and lifted his head. Lanny looked up, looked into his eyes once more. And nodding, she let him go.

Okay. Paul turned away and looked down at the flat, green surface of the water.

He took the needle case out of his pocket, lay it carefully on the rock. Then he undressed, shivering as the cold air followed his fingers, folding the clothes she had lent him. Naked he stood a long time, breathing slowly, deeply, holding the sweet cedar tang deep in his lungs as if he could hold it inside him forever.

He looked up once more—looked up at the black sky, saw stars there smear and shimmer, and sank to his knees in the moss.

Numb, focused. No hesitation as he tied off his bicep, filled the

syringe, flexed his fist until veins bulged fat, slipped the needle into the vein.

He pulled back minutely on the plunger, saw blood curl into the syringe, black in the failing moonlight.

He hesitated then, watching the inky streamers curl and coil—the secret codes; the countersigns of God. The meaning of it all, but what ... ?

No words to say. No words ...

Paul closed his eyes and drove the plunger home.

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN ENOUGH

Being with her all the time was almost more than he could bear at first. More bliss, more wonder than he ever thought he'd know. Days stretching into weeks—dying deeper, longer. She showed him new things, new minds more complex, minds she had swallowed like his own, electrochemical patterns preserved or recreated in the substance of her self—for she, it seemed, was all mind, all neural network, constant suspension of knowing in the present tense like a juggler with a million hands and a million million colored balls all aloft at once.

And so each day a widening sphere and he sank joyfully into the focused fear of rabbits, narrow slants of coyotes, foxes, skunks; a hundred sparks of bird brains, calls whistling through his inner ears like shrieking wind. Bigger animals—beaver, deer. Once he recognized a bear—memories and understanding nearly human except for lack of words.

All of it wordless really: so much time spent knowing without language that when he rose now, he often couldn't speak himself for hours at a time.

And risings fewer and farther between. Rising now only when starvation threatened. She needed sustenance too—sugars, sunlight, protein in small amounts. So out he went—less ravenous now as they adapted to one another but strange, narrow hungers: beer and maple syrup and tiny chunks of blue-veined cheese. Rising to eat and wander aimless in the steaming skid-row streets, joints aching, coughing now, lungs thick with fluid and sore. No interest in what he saw, only waiting for the call to come from within: come back. And then to hurry back, run water into the scummy tub, sink down again into bliss and with and her ...

It should have been enough. Might have been if there hadn't been anything more, but floating, simply being with her, rubbing, bumping thoughts Paul's awareness grew.

Sensed rather than seen, a dimension beyond the intimate borders of *with*. Not another place but a new perspective on the place in which they were—beyond the edges of *with or her*, a deeper darkness; vast inner ocean clicking with subtle patterns, configurations of nothingness it seemed, structures of darkness to darkness, light to light but spinning, turning like gears, folding and unfolding—so ripe with a sense of signification that they drew him in as surely as gravity. But into what he did not know—just signs, symbols—their meaning not reducible to words, knowable only as the process of their relationships—a language Paul did not possess.

Her language? he wondered. Her structures for knowing without words.

And where was she in this? Still *with* but she had changed somehow, seen from a different angle unfolded, expanded like a huge balloon with the buzz of the universe at the outer edges and Paul in the vacuum center of her thoughts. So strange to float alone within, his own consciousness uncertain without the immediate border between him and *her*—sense of self inconstant, swelling and shrinking—he was tiny, he was vast, he was... he was...

And always quailing at that outermost edge, pulling back from what he sensed as danger there—too alien the territory of different knowing on the other side.

But beautiful. Seductive. Patterns wove themselves like puzzles, ever extrapolating, always on the verge of resolution and he couldn't stay away.

Still with, still touching mind to mind with her and yet always aware now of the clicking, turning universe she was. So always back again and back—each dive lingering longer at the recognizable margin. The mesmerizing swirl and sway.

And one day, inevitable step—too curious, too close, by accident or by his secret heart's design and he drifted, dreamily across the border, into... what?

Chaos. Wildness. Slammed into like a wave. Caught up in a silent, roaring storm that was both her and more than herself. Herself unbound, unbounded. And Paul, himself—his very self—expanding to touch every surface of infinite now, exploding. Dissolving. Paul-ness a vanishing, fading report and for one brief, terrifying second he was no longer Paul at all, no longer himself or her or with but somehow of...

...and then—inner spasm of mortal terror—and he was himself again, balling up like spider that was Paul, Paul, Paul... Just Paul and he felt her recoil, withdraw—*cogitus interuptus*—and he was surfacing, choking, half drowning in the water and the darkness and the slime.

Alone.

ALONE

God, worst night of his life. Sick and frightened. Shivering under blankets, despite the heavy August heat, waiting for a call that did not come.

And dizzy he had staggered from the bed, rubbing eyes that would not seem to focus—things rippling, crawling at the edges of his vision. In the bathroom, sudden nausea and he had pulled the plug on the scummy unchanged water, watched it spiral down the drain. And then, peyote focus on the cyclone spin, he couldn't pull his gaze away—edges limned with clarity like light. Dizzier still, heavy drag pulling him forward. Falling to hands and knees to see patterns swarming between the tiny hexagonal tiles and fear growing because the patterns were familiar now—patterns like the curl and coil of unborn ferns, the whorl of steam on mirrors, the Brownian spin of jeweled particles in the air—and all of it on the pregnant verge of meaning ...

And please, please, come, he begged her—sent her, signed her, cried out in words that echoed in the empty room. Please come, but nothing in return.

And laying on the floor, cool tiles against his cheek, eyes closed but patterns crawling still—bright halogen worms in the hypnotic pulse of blood behind his eyes—he fell, descended into wild, chaotic dreams that could have been his life relived, his future told, could have been anything but which were rendered meaningless because he dreamed alone.

HE AWAKES

days later it turned out, to ticking silence and a different world.

Alone. She did not come, she would not rise. He wasn't even sure she was still there inside him—but that desertion too terrifying to contemplate, he could only wait and call and hope.

Had to hope, because the patterns were still there, not swallowing him whole, but still maddeningly just at the edge of vision, intensifying if he stared too long, but not resolving ever. So wait it out. Wait and call and hope.

Hours stretched to days. A week. Two weeks.

Frustration. Fear beneath. What had he done? What had he lost? Begging her to come back every night, so lonely without her he thought that he must die from it. The emptiness of his waking life, the emptiness of his dreams began to wear at him and one night, anger rising, fed up with hearing nothing but his own voice inside his head, Paul showered, towed himself off with vigor, shaved, combed his hair, and stepped out onto the greasy burger darkness of the downtown streets.

Hot August night and he walked for blocks through the hustling

crowd, talked to no one and ended up coming back to sit in the downstairs bar at the American; to nurse a beer and watch the girls, girls dance and strip under the fizzing neon lights.

One girl came and sat with him. Red hair. Round cheeks. Too young. He was ashamed of how young she was but still he took her upstairs to his awful room. No light but streetlights. Strange presence of another body in the narrow space. The girl smelled of vanilla and slipped the plastic packet of a condom into his palm like a secret token from a game.

Then, quick fumble to the chase, the clutch, the unexpected heat inside. So long since he had touched other flesh. His breathing ragged in his throat and the liquid pounding of his heart. Pressure built toward a solid peak and then, the sudden shift—the girl's face turned away—and there, like sudden love, she was:

Rising through him like a wave, calm presence buoyed on ecstasy. Yes. Her. With. Bliss returning, but not just bliss—underneath, like currents, rising with her, curling, coiling, spinning, silent roaring storm of pattern, meaning. No borders at all and Paul, caught up, coming—the girl's eyes wide and white in the darkness, frozen in a moment of expanding now—felt himself suddenly explode, consciousness rent into component atoms each atom a kernel that was Paul, each spiraling Paul-icule accelerating away from itself at trans-light speed to the edges of a galaxy of her. A universe of us.

Not with but of.

Not Paul but... nothing. Everything. For one brief second again, wanting it, terrified but there, determined. Holding on but then, silent elastic snap, sharp pang of grief and he was falling back to Paul, alone. Paul, screwing some underage hooker in his skid row room—and something wrong beneath him—girl's face terrified wailing. Beneath him, below him, as though he were floating just behind his own shoulder. Distant weirdness. Strange pulsing thickness in his muscles—cramped twitching. He tried to release the girl, roll off her but could not let go his grip upon her shoulders, slamming rhythm of his hips, strange grinding sounds erupting from his throat as seizure gripped him.

Watching helpless, dull pain of bitten lip and blood dotting the girl's pale, screaming face as he fucked like a pile driver, no pleasure in it at all and no way to make it stop until it stopped.

A WAVE OF DIZZINESS

passed over him but nothing more and for a terrible moment Paul thought it wouldn't work at all.

He leaned back against the log and slipped the needle out of his vein. A black pearl of blood welled and rolled slowly down his forearm leaving a dark trail. The dark line split into two as he watched, two ghost images of blood-tracked arm floating across one another. Paul blinked and his lids fluttered partway closed and stayed there as the drug laid its borders along his nerves. Reflexively he lifted his hand to his eyes, felt the needle fall from his fingers, a sting as it tumbled over his thigh to the ground. Paul's hand fell back and wouldn't lift again.

His heart kicked in his chest—it was happening. He felt sudden warmth at his back and felt himself being moved. Lanny, he guessed, feeling with the fever heat of her body pressed against his cold, bare flesh. He tried to turn his head and found he still could though he couldn't open his eyes to see her, couldn't work his lips to speak.

Don't, he wanted to tell her. Don't let go after me ... But Lanny only shifted against him, held him tighter, rocking like a crying child rocks although she made no sound.

Wetness slicked his chin. If it was her, leaving him now there was nothing he could do about it anymore—couldn't close his mouth, couldn't swallow. So strange, so familiar this creeping paralysis. Not numbness at all. He could feel everything—the cold, wet moss under his thighs, the sharpness of stones, Lanny ...

Mute flesh against his flesh.

Don't, he wanted to say again. And: Thank you. Thank you ... even now not sure what he felt so profoundly grateful for.

He tried to turn to her again and for a shocking second it felt as

though his muscles responded again—but no, nothing had moved. Nothing was moving at all. He heard himself exhale harshly, raggedly, felt the inhale falter.

And still no sign, no wordless words...

He felt his diaphragm contract in one more short, convulsive jerk; the breath exhaled again too fast, bubbling out of his mouth like water. Like her. Paul waited for the surge, waited for his chest to rise again, and the moment stretched, poured itself out into the burning darkness for time immeasurable...

HE'D COME SO CLOSE

to death. Police and paramedics, the girl slipping out unseen in the confusion and they told him he was lucky to be alive. He might have disagreed, but all he could focus on at the time was staying out of the hospital, fending off their help, relieved beyond words when they had packed up monitors and tubes and needles and finally gone.

Lucky to be alive. In the days after, charcoal silence of his empty room, Paul—like all the mutilated survivors the paramedics left behind—taking stock of this new existence, life on the other side of luck: armless, legless, scarred, blind, paralyzed.

Alone.

Because, he found, he was alone now—no access anymore to bliss, to *with*, to *her*. Every descent instead into this new chaos, wild metamorphoses from self to other to all he could not seem to bear for more than instants, microspans of now—and always physically shattered, his body the weak link unable to let go. His body yanking him back to self and singularity and seizures. Recoiling on itself like a broken rope again and again.

And no way to ask her, tell her, reassure.

I want you still.

Scared now, because she seemed more reluctant to rise in him, or rose strangely—silently, pouring from his eyes like tears as if to leave him. Or rose to him in sleep, or maybe just dreams of her, but filled with turning, twisting patterns like the ones that limmed his waking days.

Days winding down from summer's heat to autumn's first grimy showers. Tattoo drumming in the fall of rain; pulsing emblems in the clouds.

Paul hoping that he was wrong; knowing that he was not—that everything was changed: himself or her or both transformed by his new understanding—as if learning to read he could no longer know the simple beauty of black scrawl on the white field of a page. And no, not even that—because he'd wanted that, wanted to know how to *know* that way, to hold the world the way she held it, only he couldn't do it because being of meant not being anything or anyone else. Meant not even being Paul.

And that—no matter how much he hated being Paul alone, no matter how much he wanted to be *with* her or *in* her or *of* her like that—not being Paul was something it seemed that Paul just could not do.

AND SO TO WHAT?

Two days like smeared lead. Days when he walked skid row like a brittle ghost; when he envied the drunks their blood-red wine; the junkies their bone-white riders and sometimes now more than envied—pale arm extended through midmorning T-bird haze to receive the benediction of needle and spoon. Hoping against hope it would loose his hold on self enough to fly with her, rise into her.

And lose himself he did—so far from now that if she rose in him those days he never knew it, lost in another kind of bliss—numb and light and untouched by anything at all. Worse to wake from those than anything, to know the sum total of his future choices: all 31 flavors, 57 varieties of nothing. A hundred and one different ways to be alone.

And breaking suddenly on that rock—molten burn in every fiber of his flesh and he could not—could NOT go on like this.

Better to not go on at all—to stop it now, simply not be any more because he could not face the moment after now, each moment like a shark's tooth followed by another. And, hand shaking to his mouth—could he? Would he?

So simple, it seemed in gun-metal afternoon, to just not be here anymore—but careful now. He had to do it right—no practice runs because if the doctors got hold of him they would never let him go. So, how to?

And no taste for the thoughts—hanging, shooting, overdose. Drugs maybe, but not heroin so easily dispelled with Narcon—he needed something more potent, quicker, more obscure. Real poison—veratrum album, antiarin, ouabain—in his mind's eye tiny brown bottles in the forestry lab's refrigerator case. D-tubocurarine. He stopped there, something nagging at his brain.

D-tubocurarine. Curare—flying death—like Tarzan, Wildness Boy, dodging poison arrows in the forest. Gallamine. Pancuronium, so useful for anaesthetizing mice and frogs because it suppressed neuromuscular reactions but didn't cross the blood-brain barrier...

Excitement growing now, cautious as his scarred heart would allow, he thought it through, decided: It could work.

But not here, not in this place where success would leave them floating helpless in their ecstasy. And details turning in his mind like the rippling patterns in the evening rain, Paul packed his meager things, dropped his room key on the checkout desk, and took a downtown bus right through to the university.

No trouble getting in: huge campus nearly empty in evening's fading light and he still had keys to all the labs. Clean shirt and quick, determined step down echoing halls lined with oak and glass cabinets. Arrays of detritus behind the glass: dusty cocoons, snakeskins, fossil insects trapped in chunks of mud.

Someone should clean up those displays, he thought as he plundered the empty lab, claimed his prizes: brown ampoule bottle, steel syringe, and case. Somebody ought to take care of the relics of the past.

But it would not be him, for by then Paul had left the university and caught his first ride north.

THERE WAS A GENTLE ROARING

in his ears, a pulsing spot of silver in the blackness. The spot grew, kaleidoscopic into a mandala of moving lines. The lines pulsed outward from the center, waves of silver chased by waves of velvet red.

No words, but something coming clear, coming closer as Paul reached out to touch, and reaching out on every side touched everything at once.

Brief moment of fear, waiting for the recoil of his needy flesh. But recoil never came—flesh's dominion ended with the poison dart. Instead, the boundary touched and then passed through and he kept on moving outward and she moved in; as they moved together in a universe of one.

One moment of now expanding infinitely out and in to touch each atom of the world as it was now, this instant—Lanny at his back; Bill and Nat asleep in old love's arms, the forest's hum, the driver in his truck; Walter, restless in some drunken dream; Milou, head bent over her white winged desk, mosquito whining by her ear. And out and out: mosquito's brilliant greed; light bouncing off the page; colliding molecules of air—a billion trillion juggler's balls caught up in infinite, whirling now ...

And last fading echo of the pattern that was purely Paul:

"Oh," he thought, and, wordless expression of delight. "Oh!" as more light fell between.

IT WAS LATE

in the morning when Lanny awoke and the Sun was high and hot in the sky. Paul was laying on his side, his back

Continued on the next page.

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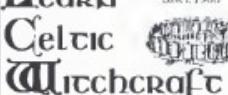
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Continued from the previous page.
to her, still completely covered in the slime
that had begun to pour from him the
moment that he'd died.

Lanny remembered that moment. She'd
been holding him, waiting for it. She couldn't
have explained why she wanted to do that,
but she figured he understood. He had that
look. When the stuff came spilling out
though, she'd let him go, put him on the
ground, backed away.

She looked down at Paul again. He was
still where she'd left him. His naked back
was pale; the knobs of his spine visible under
the skin like dinosaur bones poking up
through hard white mud. The slime was still
moving over him though, rippling gently,
making it look like he was breathing every
now and then. Lanny chewed her thumb and
watched it for a while.

Then she sat up, and reached out to touch
tentative fingertips to the slick surface.

It was neither warm nor cold, wet nor dry,
and so soft she could barely feel it under her
hand. It flowed up her fingers, snaked
around her hand and for a moment she won-
dered if maybe Paul was wrong; wondered
if anything Paul had said or thought was
true, but then before she'd even had the
chance to hope, the slime withdrew. It
moved down the hill slipping slowly under
the water and within a few minutes it was
gone, submerged completely leaving not
even a ripple behind.

Lanny rubbed the arm where the slime
had been, felt old scars there, pale craters
dotted the flesh. She'd seen three people
die before. Three friends: Lily, Pink, and
Dan, when the pure China White heroin hit
the streets. The girls on one night; Dan, the
next. It was that finally made her kick. Not
them dying but the looks on their faces after
they were dead—so surprised, so empty.
She looked at Paul, thought of turning him
over to see if he looked that way too but
didn't do it. Whatever he'd wanted she
hoped he'd found it—anything else she
didn't need to know.

The warming Sun felt good on her skin
and Lanny sat on the drying moss for a long
time wondering what she would do next.
There was still liquid in the fallen ampoule—
she'd take it with her just in case but it didn't
really call to her today.

She had some other things too: Walter's
truck and Paul's wad of cash, not a lot but
enough to make up her mind on maybe.

She could go up north and see her grand-
mother maybe or down south to visit her sister
who'd married some Oglala in Wyoming.
Or maybe somewhere she'd never been
before. California, Las Vegas, fucking Dis-
neyland.

Why not? she asked herself. Why the hell
not?

And then gingerly, feeling as fragile as
something newly born, Lanny stood and
stretched and let the warm wind ripple like
silk scarves across her skin. *

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THE PLIABLE CHILD

Continued from page 48

what was going on: a couple of streets over, Agger Hensel, armed to the teeth with God-knocks-what, had shot his mom and dad on the front lawn, and was holed up in the house, holding his brothers and sisters hostage. Later, we found out that Mrs. Kohner from Arbutus was in there with him, too. But we never did learn how she came to be mixed up with the likes of him, because at the end of the week he ended up killing her, too, along with his siblings and himself. Understandably, Agger Hensel gobbled up every headline *The Clarion* had to spare. In fact, there never was a word about the Steinmetzes and Little Miss Messiah.

Cal was naturally mighty peeved. "I guess the little tyke didn't get all the devil out of him that night after all, did she, Joe?"

"Guess not," I said. "Unless she decided to put some of the devil back." Cal looked at me funny and I didn't elaborate.

He never did collect his five bucks for the scoop. But that was soon forgotten, anyhow. Not too long after, Cal got some bad news of his own. Seems he had developed some kind of growth on his vocal cords. Betty, his wife, left him soon after, and it was all downhill from there.

Every now and then we'd hear rumors about the Steinmetzes—how they were spotted here or there and how this little girl was allegedly performing miracles and such. But people had pretty much moved on to other things. War was brewing over in Europe and folks were taking up sides here at home. Then there was Dee and me and our little miracle that had been so long in coming: when she was born the following May, we named her Diane. And I can tell you for a fact, she was anything but pliable.

ALL THAT BRINGS ME BACK TO MY prayers and where this story began, all these years later. Dee was sleeping, of course; her suffering didn't leave her much energy for anything else. I stayed nearby in the cushy chair just outside the bedroom door, nodding off every now and then, biding my time for sorry fate. I don't know how long I'd been dozing when I felt the hand upon my shoulder and heard her warm whisper, "Mr. Gerritsen?"

"Gracie?" I said, before I even opened my eyes, before I saw the woman she had become and the mass of curls that will forever secure her in my memory. "Little Gracie Steinmetz?"

"Uh huh," she smiled, looking so much like her mother. "How is Mrs. Gerritsen doing, sir?"

I shook my head sorrowfully from side to side, then let my chin ride a sigh to my chest. "Not good. Not good at all, I'm afraid."

"May I see her?"

"Of course," I said, and guided her to

Dee's bedside.

"Look who's come to visit, Dee. You won't believe how big she's grown. Look, Dee. You remember little Gracie Steinmetz? The pliable child?"

Dee stirred, raised a finger. I thought her eyes might open, but she only skimmed the surface. I couldn't help myself from blubbering: "I don't know how much longer I can bear to see her in such pain, Gracie. It's so hard like this . . ."

"May I be alone with her a while?" Gracie asked.

I shrugged, composing myself as best I could. "Well, yeah, sure." I patted Dee's hand. "Gracie wants to stay with you a bit. I'm going to leave you two. Be just outside the door if you need me."

I must have drifted off again. Next thing I know, I wake up with a start, like I just slammed through the crust of a frozen lake. I'm drenched with icy sweat and shaking worse than a house painter with the dts. "Dee," I shout, but it's no more than a whimper. "Dee," I cry, but not a sound reaches my ears. I try to rise from the cushy chair, but my legs won't go, vines hissing round my ankles and cobwebs wrapping up the rest of me. And then it strikes me with the mournful clarity of a train whistle yearning on a summer night: I have supplicated myself to Gracie, but what exactly have I been praying for?

I am still in the cushy chair when Doc Welland stops by. "What happened here, Joe?" he asks.

I fail to grasp his meaning.

"In your lap, Joe? Is that a crowbar or what?"

I do not know where the tire iron has come from. I do not know if someone slapped it into my hand or I scooped it up myself.

"And the blood, Joe? What's that about? It's all over the front walk, up the stairs, on the bannister—right to the door of your wife's bedroom, Joe? You'd better tell me what happened here, Joe."

"I've been praying," I say.

"Praying? For what, Joe? For what?"

"I don't know, Doc," I say. "And I got to tell you, I won't know—not until you open that door."

DESPITE THE DEPRESSION NOT BEING A living memory for most any more, Edison Heights hasn't really changed all that much. Families still come, families still go, carting the usual baggage. Just down the block, in fact, there's a new family moving in and I've been summoned to the kitchen to squeeze a few lemons. "Not fair if I don't bring a treat for the little ones, too," Dee says.

According to Doc Welland, her recovery is what they call a spontaneous remission. "Your wife is nothing short of a miracle, Joe. There's just no underestimating the power of prayer, is there?"

"All depends who you pray to," I say. "And what you pray for."

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BY ERIC BAKER

Get Medieval! with the latest and greatest fantasy RPGs, CCGs, and diceless adventures.

LOOKED AT ONE WAY, *NIGHT OF 1,000 SCREAMS* IS ONE OF THE BEST RPG ADVENTURES OF THE year. Looked at another, it is just about average for the state of the industry today. If you think an adventure module should provide a series of challenges that must each be met in turn, then you will absolutely love playing *1K Screams*. If, on the other hand, you think that a module's job is to present a problem and provide the circumstances and nonplayer characters (NPCs) that will affect characters as the players chart their own paths to solving the problem, then you are going to be as frustrated by *Night of 1,000 Screams* (by Ree Soesbee, John Zinser, and Cris Dornaus Alderac Entertainment Group, Ontario, CA 1998 48 pages, \$9.95) as you are by most modules on the market.

Legend of the Five Rings is a game of medieval Japanese role-playing set in the mythic realm of Rokugan, in the same way that *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is medieval European role-playing set in a variety of made-up lands. Some of the background is straight from the history books, and some of it is complete fable.

What *1K Screams* has going for it is pace. It does not slow down. The adventure is set in the city of Ryoko Owarri, the infamous *City of Lies*, whose boxed set was reviewed last issue. You don't need the *City of Lies* set to play the adventure, and the adventure moves so fast there isn't really an advantage in having the campaign book. Everything you need to know about the city for the adventure is in the module, and the players don't have time to wander off exploring. As the adventure opens, it is dusk on the night of the annual Bon Festival (sort of the Rokugan version of Halloween), and by dawn the players will have run through 17 encounters. If they meet each challenge correctly, they will have saved the city from catastrophe. If they screwed up along the way, they will probably have died in the attempt.

Night of 1,000 Screams is intended as a counterpoint to the earlier module, *Honor's Veil*. *Veil* explored the

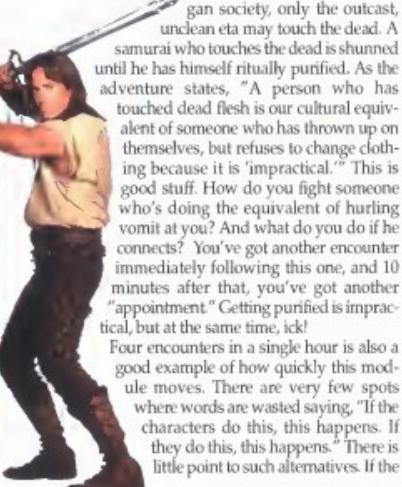
social conventions of Rokugan society. *Screams* explores the *Legend of the Five Rings* combat system. It doesn't ignore the social conventions; players will need their brains as well as their swords to survive the night and save the city, but combat is what this adventure is about. The Introduction says, "This episode was designed to answer the question, 'What can I do to add more combat to my game, without killing off all the player characters?'" I'm not as sure as the writers are that they answered that question, but they did build the adventure around a lot of encounters that can only be solved by combat.

The second encounter in the module gives a good illustration of this module at its best. The characters have already survived one battle when they are taken off to another encounter in the eta quarter of the city, on the grounds of the crematorium. Faced with a large party of enemies, the characters' goals are to stop the desecration of the dead that is under way and to find out why it is occurring. At the same time, they must not actually touch any of the dead bodies or body parts that litter the crematorium grounds. In Rokugan society, only the outcast, unclean eta may touch the dead. A

samurai who touches the dead is shunned until he has himself ritually purified. As the adventure states, "A person who has touched dead flesh is our cultural equivalent of someone who has thrown up on themselves, but refuses to change clothing because it is 'impractical.'" This is good stuff. How do you fight someone who's doing the equivalent of hurling vomit at you? And what do you do if he connects? You've got another encounter immediately following this one, and 10 minutes after that, you've got another "appointment." Getting purified is impractical, but at the same time, ick!

Four encounters in a single hour is also a good example of how quickly this module moves. There are very few spots where words are wasted saying, "If the characters do this, this happens. If they do this, this happens." There is little point to such alternatives. If the

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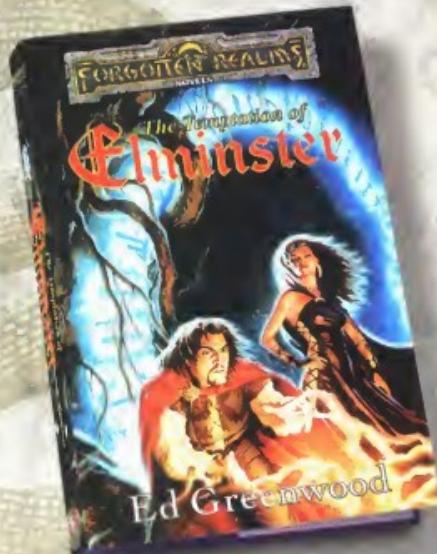
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game begins with a state-of-the-art CGI movie, but then the actual play begins and you have to stop yourself from looking for the slot to put the coin in. It is bizarre.

And fun. As with M&M, a game doesn't have to be state-of-the-art to be fun. There was a reason we put all those quarters in all those machines, and GM! captures that. The controls are so simple that two people can play on the same keyboard. If you've got a joystick, you can have three playing on one computer. Internet/network play allows up to four players.

For Monolith, the selling point for GM! is clearly its humor. The four characters in the game are each a fantasy archetype, but all have a humorous twist. The big dumb barbarian talks with an Arnold Schwarzenegger

characters don't resolve each encounter properly, then they will be unable to advance to the next and the city will be lost. An NPC is provided in the first encounter to join the character's party and help make sure they stick to the proper path. Other NPCs and clues pop up along the way, often out of nowhere, to keep the characters moving or push them back on the path. Whether this is fine with you or simply makes you annoyed is a matter of personal preference.

Night of 1,000 Screams is a great plot with good NPCs and an inventive background. If you don't mind tightly scripted adventures, then you will love this module.

Hercules: The Legendary Journeys: Trading Card Game. Wizards of the Coast Inc., Renton, WA, 1998, \$5.99 & \$2.49.

The third release in Wizards of the Coast's ARC System™ of collectible card games for people new to CCGs is *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys: Trading Card Game*. All the cards use art and quotations from the TV series, including cards for Hercules and Iolous. There are a total of 180 cards available in 40-card, ready-to-play decks for \$5.99, and 12-card themed booster packs for \$2.49. The cards can be found at hobby, game, and comic book stores.

ARC System™ decks can be used with any other release, so that *Hercules* decks can be matched against *Xena* or C23 decks, the first releases in the line. Games can be played in 10 to 15 minutes and take about that long to teach. If you have a Hercules fan who you couldn't get to try CCGs even with the *Xena* deck, give them one of these.

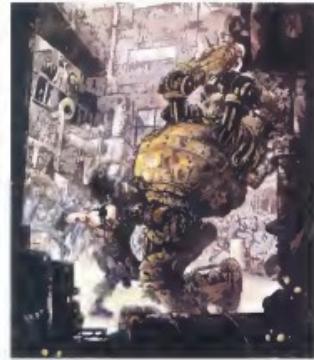
Get Medieval! Monolith Productions, Kirkland, WA 1998, Win95, CD-Rom.

There must be something about dungeon crawling that brings out the retro in game designers. Last issue it was *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven*, a first-person point-of-view game with *Doom*-style, two-dimensional mapping, and this time it is *Get Medieval!*, a top view scroller of all things. In 1998! The



accent, the Elf archer has a self-esteem problem, and so on. As they romp through the dungeon, the characters keep up a running commentary of catch phrases and comments. Some of them are pretty funny; most of them make you smile, but all of them get a little old by the time you've cleared five or six of the 30 levels. Do play with more than one player at least once though, so you can hear the comments they make when they shoot each other "accidentally."

Get Medieval! has well-rendered, if 2-D graphics. The characters can move only in four directions, but that just makes them that much easier to control. There are 30 levels, but when you've cleared all those the game will make more, random levels for you so that the game is essentially endless. It is



TOP LEFT: *Avoid Death Night* of 1,000 Screams. LEFT and BELOW: Laugh with Get Medieval! ABOVE: City O' Gloom, set in the Deadlands.

quick to learn, easy to play, and fully absorbing. Kind of like *Pac-Man* with funny voices and no annoying music. And you won't have to sell your car to afford a computer that will play it. *Get Medieval!* is definitely worth a try.

City o' Gloom: A Campaign Setting for Deadlands. By Shane Lacy Hensley. Pinnacle Entertainment Group, Inc., Blacksburg, VA 1998, Boxed Set, \$30.00.

City o' Gloom is the latest expansion for Pinnacle's *Deadlands: The Weird West* system. It describes Salt Lake City and the rest of Utah, circa 1876 in a world where the Civil War rages on, California is its own country, the Native American Indians have held on to their own nations, and the dead walk again. The boxed set contains a 128-page sourcebook describing the city and state. There are two smaller rules books, one with rules for metal-magic (creating the dystopian machines of this world), and another with rules for mechanical character augmentation (steampunk cyberlimbs and body enhancements). There is a map of Salt Lake City, a full-color cardstock Skull-Chucker Arena map, as well as counters for playing the game on it. There is also a full-color, cardboard-mounted map of a giant landscape alongside a giant salt rattle.

Deadlands is a strange game. Its magic system, which depends upon the player drawing poker hands from an ordinary deck of cards to cast spells, has been described on the Internet as having "all the complexity of contract bridge, but without the pulse-pounding excitement." Nevertheless, *Deadlands* is the first role-playing game to ever make a success of a Wild West background. Who knew that what it took to do so was giving the cowboy background a Lovecraftian twist and mixing in a little steampunk?

The first 65 pages are background for player and GM alike. The next section is the rules for the "Skull-Chucker" game (a blood-sport version of football), followed by some



new archetypes and some new relics (magic/scientific items). The last 47 pages expand on the information in the first 65 and are for the GM's eyes only. Given all this information, a good index would have been a nice addition to the books, or at least a more detailed Table of Contents. Page references in the first section do at least direct GMs to the proper page in the back of the book, but then the back pages don't refer the GMs back to the proper front ones.

If you've been longing to add more machines and devices to your *Deadlands* game, then this is the supplement for you. If you've wanted to run adventures in Utah and you don't mind working to find the information you need, then you should also pick up *City o' Gloom*. If, however, you are new to *Deadlands* and are looking for a place to start, this isn't it.

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons® Core Rules Version 2.0, TSR, Inc. Renton, WA 1998, Win95, CD-Rom.

At the simplest level, part of what TSR has done is strip all the art from the *AD&D* rule books, put the text into RTF files, and loaded them onto a CD-Rom. Course, despite the stripped down format, you are getting a lot of books for your money. They are: *Players Handbook*, *Dungeon Master® Guide*, *Monstrous Manual™*, *Arms & Equipment Guide*, *Tome of Magic*, *Dungeon Master® Option: High Level Campaigns*, *Player's Option™: Combat & Tactics*, *Player's Option™: Skills & Powers*, and *Player's Option™: Spells & Magic*.

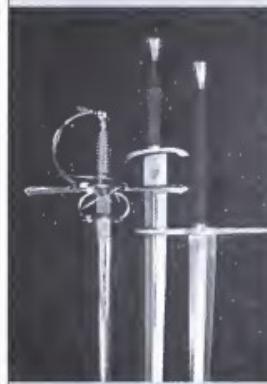
Besides the books, you get a program to generate characters (or NPCs) using either Core or Player's Option rules. There is also a dice-rolling program, but it is really only useful if you have a roll with a lot of modifiers that you are going to be making lots of times an adventure. Nor does it work particularly well with other games since you can't program dice formulas into it.

The coolest utility is "Campaign Mapper," a program from ProFantasy, the people who make the "Campaign Cartographer" program. Both programs let you make, clear legible, and professional-looking maps of wilderness terrain or city streets. CM is sort of CC lite, but maps made on either program work with the other. CM has CC's basic drawing features, but CM can't create layers and 50 percent of CC's drawing commands aren't in CM. CM can't use the CC add-ins that let CC draw maps of dungeons and more detailed cities. Just like CC, however, CM works with *Core Rules* 2's Encounter Generator, providing hot spots on maps that link to the information in encounter files.

The truth is that almost everything that the *Core Rules* CD will do for you can be done more quickly and easily with a set of dice, paper, pencils, and the real, printed books. On the other hand, it is a lot easier to haul around a laptop and one CD-Rom than it is nine hardback books. Also, things like

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the maps and the encounter sheets will look much neater if you let the computer help you generate them. And sometimes neatness counts.

Epiphany: The Legends of Hyperborea.

Designer: Greg Porter. BTRC, Collingsville, VA 1998, 48 pages, \$9.95.

Epiphany: The Legends of Hyperborea is BTRC's entry into the diceless games market. For those of you who have played any of BTRC's other games or read Greg Porter's role-playing aids like *Guns, Guns, Guns* or the *Vehicle Design System*, let me hasten to assure you that *Epiphany* is not a "joke" system or even a parody like *Macho Women with Guns*. No, in 48 pages, Greg presents a straight campaign background and a good, honest diceless system for playing in it.

While firmly in the diceless experience over accuracy tradition, *Epiphany* is not on the radical fringe of diceless games. Greg even spares us the front section editorial on why diceless is the only "true" way to role-play that many diceless game designers indulge in. *Epiphany* has a very good, very formalized conflict-resolution system that depends upon the characters' strengths and weaknesses and not at all on dice. It works simply. Instead of having a rating for each characteristic and skill, *Epiphany* characters make a note of characteristics and skills they have that are exceptional. Having a characteristic or skill that applies to a conflict gives the character an advantage in it. The player divides the applicable advantages into attack and defense. Simultaneously each opponent holds out their hands with the fingers extended to show how they played their advantages. Each character loses a number of advantages equal to the amount their defense is exceeded by the opponent's attack. This goes on until conflict is resolved. Thus a character who is exceptionally strong, very intelligent, and an experienced swordsman, goes into a fight with four advantages (a base one plus three), while his opponent might be only very agile and have great endurance for a total of three advantages.

The world of Hyperborea is a lost world background. Set in a "time not our own," play takes place in the mythic kingdoms of Atlantis, Mu, and Lemuria. They are all neighbors at the South Pole, clustered around the opening to the hollow earth, and warmed by the Inner Sun as well as our own. The technology level is past ours, but weapons' technology is kept artificially primitive and everything from smelting alloys to healing injuries depends upon magic.

Epiphany as a system is more interesting than Hyperborea is as a background. The only rocky part of *Epiphany*'s system is the magic rules, which are less intuitive and thus harder to keep track of. Still, if you are looking for a mechanic to simplify play in your favorite background, then *Epiphany* could easily be the system for you.

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BOOKS

Continued from page 21

have special talents, or "knacks," that allow them to see the future, read people's thoughts, or manipulate matter with their minds. In New England, such talents are considered witchcraft, and those who use them are put to death. In the South, the site of the British Crown Colonies, magic is accepted. But magic is not the only issue dividing frontier America. Slavery, outlawed in the North and thriving in the South, causes major political tensions that threaten to erupt in war.

The seventh son of a seventh son, Alvin Maker carries special powers and a destiny to build a Crystal City. At this point in his quest, Alvin is struggling to understand the destiny that has been foretold to him, to find out where he must build the Crystal City and how.

Alvin's wife, Peggy, has the power to see each person's heartfire, or soul, to know their most intimate secrets and to follow the possible paths of their futures. She sees in these futures a horrible war and is trying to create the one possible future that can avoid it. In that quest, she makes a fascinating discovery: that the heartfires of the slaves are almost entirely hidden from her—and from the slaves themselves. Reuniting the slaves with their heartfires may be their only hope for freedom, and it may also be the trigger for a bloody war.

While Alvin's character in this book is only moderately compelling, the other characters are fascinating and delightful. Peggy is the heart of this novel, and her intelligence and determination immediately draw us in to her story. Alvin's colorful companions provide us with a wonderful sense of the times and some great laughs. And real people of the period, like naturalist Jean-Jacques Audubon and writer Honoré de Balzac, become important characters in the story. Balzac, in fact, threatens to steal the book, with his sharp wit and relentlessly candid observations.

The one quibble I have is that I wish the book were more descriptive. Characters are seldom described, and when they are, it's in the sketchiest way. Locations also are described only briefly, which makes me, as the reader, fill in the blanks with bad old movie sets. Card obviously knows his American history, and so could provide me with a much more realistic view of these locations than I can provide myself. Perhaps this lack of description has arisen because this is the fifth book in the series and this is the only area in which I felt the book was wanting.

Heartfire combines political intrigue, an epic scope, emotionally potent issues—such as how we choose to live our lives—and wraps them all up in an engaging, multilayered plot. Now is a very good time to jump into "The Tales of Alvin Maker."

Jeanne Cavelos

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VAMPIRE

Continued from page 77

to the point where she'll have to either go vampire or be forever lost to the world.

It scares me that these are my only choices. I pull back.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

Rudy watches me from the rear-view mirror and I can see he's curious as to what I might do. This is not his style; he's usually very discreet, professional.

It's this girl. She's got to him, too. She makes us all do things we wouldn't normally do.

Rudy winks and gives me the thumbs up.

I feel all twisted up inside. It is not altogether unpleasant.

If I wanted I could take her right then, drain her blood, force some of my own back down her throat. Do a vampire wedding ceremony in the back of a taxi with Rudy as the justice of the peace. She'd be mine forever. Only I can't bring myself to do it.

"Get us to the club," I say, my voice cracking from thirst. "Hurry."

"We're there," says Rudy.

That's when I notice that we've been circling the place, that Rudy has been biding his time, waiting for my signal to let us out.

"Wait here," I say.

Rudy just smiles.

THE CLUB IS DARK AND APPROPRIATELY smoky, which does a pretty good job of covering the smell of blood. A vamp band plays Top 40 dance tunes. They're even pretty good. The vamp hostess leads us to my usual table at the back. Our vamp waiter shows me the special wine list.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask.

Kyla says, "Diet Pepsi."

I order a glass of the special "RBC Cabernet."

I excuse myself to use the executive restroom. It's all I can do not to run because I'm desperate to use a vampwhore. The owner keeps several desperados on staff, trading them heroin for blood. A good deal all around.

It takes several minutes to drink a cup from a scruffy-looking fellow named Buck. I charge it to my account. This kid's blood and the "cabernet" ought to hold me for a couple of hours.

Kyla has ordered the calamari appetizer. "I've always wanted to try these," she says, offering me a breaded tentacle.

She's adorable, and I've never even wanted to try calamari.

I order the steak tartare. My waiter pronounces it an excellent choice.

Kyla asks for the filet mignon, well done. "Wanna dance?" she says.

It's a slow number; holding her in my arms leaves me breathless. I'm gonna need another glass of cabernet, that's for sure. Maybe I should just order the bottle. Some-

times it takes another person to make you see you've been lonely.

Kyla strokes my chin and lets her fingers tickle my lips. I almost moan in front of everyone. I nuzzle against her, lick the salt from her neck and prepare to go down, taste what she's really made of. I want to make this girl my life partner, I'm sure of it. And on the first date no less.

I open my mouth, run my tongue along her skin, scrape my teeth over her collarbone, and sink them into her. She tastes sweet, warm. I can't get enough. I hold her and suckle at her neck, feeling her body relax as she gives herself over to me. She's mine, she will always be mine. Not that she ever had a choice. My Rasputin-eyes made certain of that. It hits me then, what I'm doing, and I'm overcome with shame for wanting to use her. I pull away. Some scruples I got. She deserves more.

I got a crushing feeling in my chest, like the first time I woke up in a coffin. There are roads you never wanna walk down because, once you do, the next thing you know you find yourself supplying girls to escort joints, hitting on every Joe you take a fancy to without caring whether or not that kills him.

I've seen this happen too many times, had to stand by helplessly as Lucy, my ex, lost that last drop of humanity just before she went over. Once you lose respect for them you lose respect for yourself.

No way will I let that happen to me.

Kyla flashes a smile so slight it seems painted on. "Are you okay? Sorry if I'm pushing things." She looks worried. "It's just that sometimes you wait too long and you never get the chance again."

"No problem," I say, knowing exactly what she means. Opportunity is knocking, only I know better than to open the door. I feel sick. It's not hunger, but the terrifying realization that I am stark-raving-lunatic in love with this girl. Worse, I want her to love me back, to choose me the way I have chosen her. I won't coerce her into the life like Lucy did to me.

It ain't real love when it's forced, and if it ain't real, what's the point of pretending? Hollywood or not, it ain't for me.

We walk back to our table, neither one speaking. The hair at the back of my neck bristles. Helmut is sitting at the bar, watching us. He's drinking something with milk in it and lifts his glass, mouthing, "Cheers." So he's followed me here, the little prick. Suddenly, I want to run away, but there's no running away and seeing Helmut just reminds me of that.

He stands then, wobbling just a little, makes his way to our table. His eyes fix on Kyla's tits like he's staring into her eyes. "You're making a big mistake," he says. "If it's still not too late, I'd like you to reconsider my offer."

"Maybe you should reconsider," I say. I'm scared to lose her but even more scared

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she'll stay. "You got anything legit to offer?" I ask him.

Helmut grins. "Of course," he says. "There's always jobs for those who want the work."

Kyla crosses her arms, shrugs. "Sorry," she says. "I'm happy where I am."

Helmut does not take this well. He points his finger at her, says, "You don't have what it takes and I can tell. I wasn't always a troll. I used to be somebody, worked with real talent. Ask this guy if he's sent any clients to the big time? He's no better than me, only he won't admit it. Don't say I didn't warn you." He staggers back to the bar.

I'm surprised to learn he's jealous. So Helmut wants what I got. How can I tell him it ain't worth all that much?

Kyla holds her head up straight. She tries to look into my eyes, but breaks away. "Is that true?" she asks.

"It's true," I admit.

She wants me to tell her she's got everything, more than everything, that there's never been another girl like her.

But I'll never get rid of her if I tell her the truth. Funny thing is, I'll never get rid of her no matter what I tell her. "You're a nice girl," I say, "but there's nothing special about you."

She excuses herself to use the bathroom. I see her shoulders tense up like she's sobbing.

It takes all I have not to go after her.

Meanwhile, a vamp waitress is looking at Helmut like she's never seen anything like him.

He returns her stare, and for a minute I wonder who is scamming who?

I got a feeling that before the evening is done, Helmut will become a vamp or else he'll be dead.

I don't want to stay around to see which way it goes.

I tell our waiter to doggie-bag our orders to go. "We gotta get out of here," I say when Kyla comes back.

She gives me the silent treatment, probably better that way.

If I had a heart it would be breaking.

Rudy hauls us back to the airport. It took an hour to get here it now takes three hours to get back. Before we get out, I empty my wallet into Kyla's hand.

She stares at the money, already hurting too much to be insulted.

"It just ain't happening here," I say. "It will never happen here. Sorry."

At the counter I charge her ticket to my card.

She clears her throat. "Victor," she begins.

"Stop," I say. I do Rasputin-eyes and whisper that she's to go home, forget all about me, find somebody else, somebody who deserves her. "You don't want what I have to give," is the last thing I say.

Her plane won't leave till morning. I still got one more choice to make. Sooner or later, everyone goes over. I know that all too well.

The question is, do I hang around and watch Kyla's plane take off? Or save up my goodbyes for another day? *

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Contributors.

MICHAEL LIBLING CURRENTLY resides in Dollard des Ormeaux, Quebec. He has been married for 24 years to Pat and is the father of three daughters. A graduate of Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) in Montreal, he was a student of both Clark Blaise and Mordecai Richler, a fact which demonstrates he is not opposed to name-dropping.

Since 1977, Michael has made the bulk of his living through his writing, primarily in the advertising and promotional fields. His promotional writing encompasses TV, radio, print, direct marketing, audio-visual and a large amount of speechwriting—from roasts to motivational sermons.

At various times he has worked as a "trivia" columnist for the *Montreal Gazette* and *Vancouver Sun*, and as an occasional feature writer for the late *Montreal Star*. He is also the composer of 35,000 trivia questions for an arcade game which can be found in better bars across the continent. For almost 14 years he was writer and on-air host of a weekly phone-in show on Montreal's number one English radio station, CJAD.

Michael has made short story sales both in England and the United States. His novel, *Life in Jenk*, is currently seeking a publisher. Most important of all, he collects old TV guides, along with Howdy Doody, Roy Rogers, Gene Autrey, Hopalong Cassidy and Lone Ranger memorabilia. He hopes the readers of *Realms* will overlook this deep-seated character flaw.

Leslie What began writing fiction in earnest in 1992. She has since retired from a career as a licensed vocational nurse and published her work in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Hysteria*, and several regional publications. She has just completed her first novel, *Fingertalk*, a post-feminist comedic novel, and is at work on a second about magic in the modern world.

John Hanley graduated from the Academy of Art with a degree in Design and Illustration. John then became an apprentice in a commercial art studio in Chicago where he ran packages and was frequently told... "We don't do people... stop painting people..." Laid off from his position the day before Thanksgiving, he now works free-lance with clients that include DC Comics, Marvel Entertainment, Warner Bros., Dreamworks SKG and other various editorial and advertising assignments... all with people in them. John works in a mixed media of oils, acrylics and prismacolor on illustration board. This



Michael Libling



Leslie What

is his first appearance in *Realms*.

David Hoing lives in Waterloo, Iowa with a dog named Puppet and a ferret named Sequel. He is single, though he hopes that condition will be changing next spring when he and his girlfriend, Joni plan to do the "M" thing.

He is a Library Associate at the University of Northern Iowa, where he has worked for nearly 20 years. He has a degree in English from UNI. Dave has traveled to 33 states and 24 countries. Of the latter, England is by far his favorite.

He collects antiquarian books by decade and then by individual year. He has at least one book from every decade since 1530 and every year since 1766. He also owns a book from 1501 and one from 1474! Dave writes original wedding songs for friends and draws, paints and sculpts as well.

His literary fiction has been published in *Crosscurrents*, *The Pacific Review*, *The Coe Review*, *Plaintext*, *Inner Weather*, *Jabberwocky*, and *Black and White*. His genre fiction has been included in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Century*, *Dark Iowa*, *Bright Iowa* and *Starwind*.

As "Wotan's Pass" suggests, Dave is particularly drawn to medieval European history... many of his stories involve either time travel or alternate histories.

Matthew Woodring Stover's SF-adventure-fantasy-romance, *Heroes Die*, came out in trade paperback from Del Rey in August. He's also the author of the heroic fantasies *Iron Dawn* and *Jericho Moon*, both from Roc.

He was bitterly disappointed to find that the Science Fiction Book Club dual edition of his first two novels only carried a warning for explicit language—he wonders how much disemboweling, impalement, and general mayhem does it take to get an explicit violence warning? He has resolved to try harder in the future.

For recreation, Matt runs marathons and competes as an amateur kickboxer.

He lives in Chicago with his partner of nearly 10 years, the noted painter Robyn Fielder, and a pair of enormous Maine Coon cats who have been known to kill and eat small yappy dogs. *

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